AMERICAN CERAMICS 1/1

State of the Art: Four Essays on the Clay Movement's Past, Present, and Future

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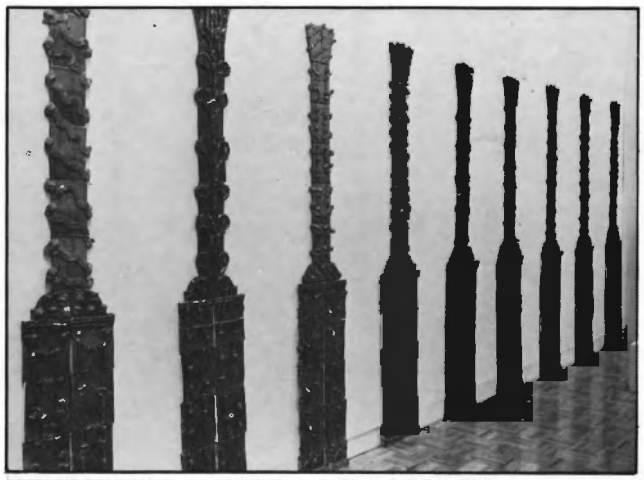

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(Cover) Untitled *(1981) by Ron Nagle 6" (15.2 cm) high, earthenware. Collection Daniel Jacobs and Derek Mason. Courtesy Charles Cowles Gallery, New York. Photo: John Chang McCurdy.*

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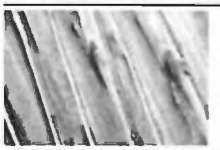

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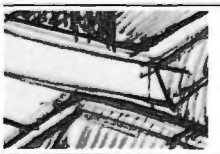

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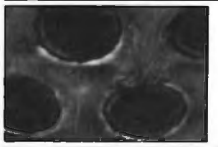

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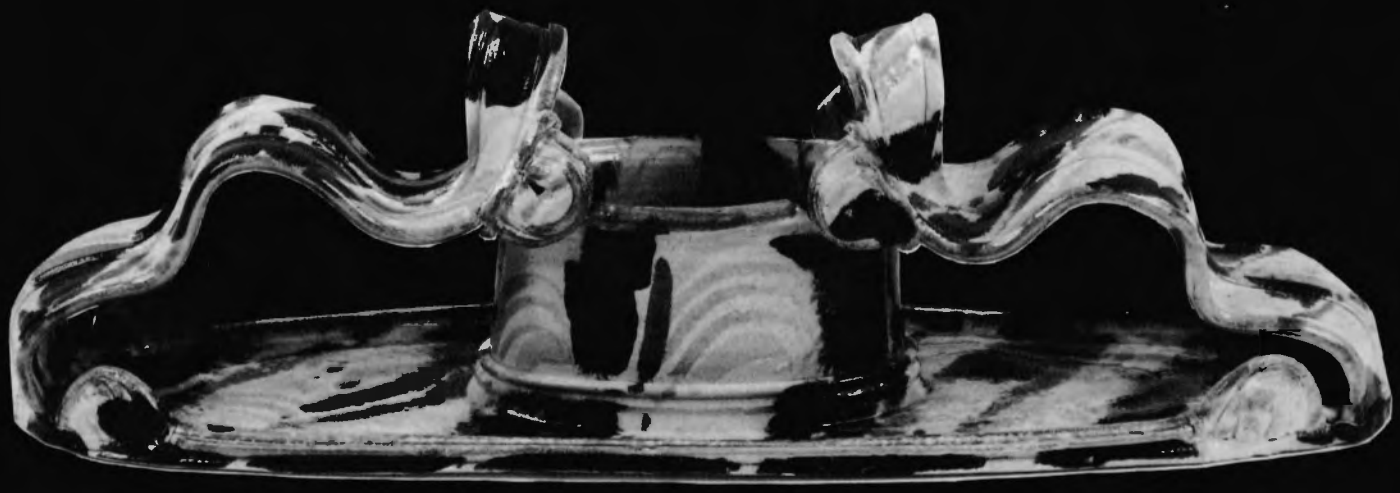

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Publisher's Statement

The American ceramic-art movement, as we now know it, began to take shape in the 1870s. In the ensuing years, we have seen periods of great vision and talent, and its artists have made significant contributions to the art of our century, both here and abroad.

Surprisingly, efforts to document, scrutinize, and contemplate these contributions have lagged far behind the clay movement itself—a condition *American Ceramics* magazine will attempt to rectify. The fundamental cause for the founding of this publication is to provide a forum in which scholars and critics can explore aesthetic, philosophical, and social issues in a unique investigation of ceramics and its role in our culture.

In addition, this magazine will document the many forms of vital expression now evident in ceramics, as well as trace the historical precedents for this present activity. *American Ceramics* magazine will thus assume a unique position among art periodicals as the first critical journal exclusively devoted to the ceramic arts.

I hope that by publishing *American Ceramics* magazine, I will encourage others to join with myself and our editor, Michael McTwigan, in using the pages of this magazine to engage in a dialogue that reflects the dynamics of today's ceramic-art movement.

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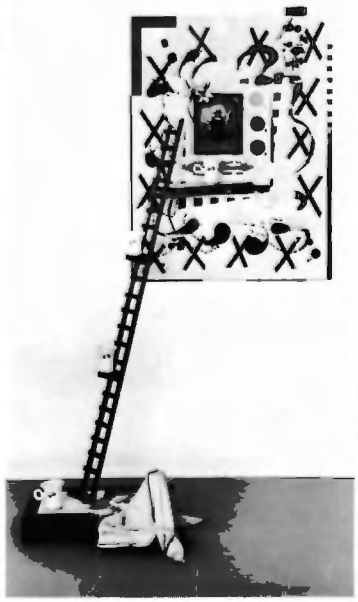

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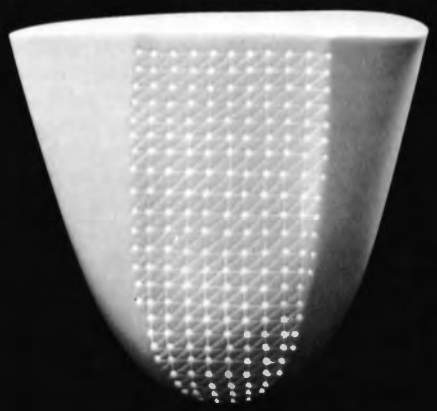

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Timothy Moore

Ceramic Art: Redefinition

A review of the clay movement's past, present, and future.

by Garth Clark

With every decade has come the inevitable article stating that ceramics had reached its most crucial point in time. Possibly each passing appraisal seemed correct at the moment it was written. However, without fear of contradiction, I believe the 1980s will witness that true integration of ceramics into the fabric of American fine art we have so long anticipated. For the first time, ceramic art is fetching prices equal to that of other mediums. It is being collected by the most adventurous and discerning young art collectors, and it is being shown and drawn into the museum world. Ceramics has even reached one of those validating New York institutions, the Whitney Museum of American Art (even though it is arriving in an antiquated and dilapidated vehicle). Ceramics is poised on the brink of a very ambivalent moment in its recent history—the point of acceptance. Acceptance brings with it many rewards: earnest appreciation, patronage, and for some, adulation. It also brings many problems; success offers comforts not always conducive to growth and exploration.

This may be the moment, then, to carefully consider the past, present, and future of American ceramic art. First of all, what do we mean by the term "ceramic art"? Are the ceramic arts an independent art genre, an attitude to process, a philosophical tradition, or a material expression of other disciplines such as painting and sculpture? In the most simplistic terms, ceramic art is an artwork made of clay. Yet the closer we look at this definition, the more unsatisfactory it becomes. The ceramic arts are many things; broadly speaking, I identify three categories within ceramics: sculpture, painting, and the vessel.

Of these three, sculpture has drawn the greatest amount of attention and hope. It has also performed the most poorly. To speak plainly, it has failed as a genre. While the 1960s and a good part of the seventies were dominated by attention to sculptural ceramics, of late this "movement" has become increasingly fragmented, confused, and uneven in its achievements. Certainly we have individual success—Viola Frey, Robert Arneson, Stephen DeStaebler, Mary Frank, and possibly Richard Shaw—but not enough to consider ceramics an independent sculptural genre. It was exactly this material xenophobia that sowed the seeds of failure from the outset. When the first signs of achievement appeared in clay sculpture during the early sixties, ceramists incorrectly saw this as the answer to their prayers. If the ceramics departments taught sculpture instead of pottery, they reasoned, potters would, be making art.

After two decades in which a massive educational effort was expended to produce ceramic sculptors, very little has been added to the form vocabulary of sculpture by the ceramist. A further irony is that nearly all the ceramists who have succeeded in achieving status in the sculpture world entered ceramics before this educational process was instigated. The problem was that the ceramics department was a poor place, intellectually and financially, for a sculptor to develop. Few of the appointed tutors had any real knowledge of the broader issues of sculpture; most were refugees from pottery who were now fashioning sculpt-a-pots—an androgynous and unhappy mixture of free-form sculpture and battered pottery. Students were taught to see form through clay alone and were generally separated from the sculpture department itself. So we created a generation of artists handicapped by their blind devotion to a material that was, in terms of current sculptural concerns, severely limited.

For ceramic sculpture to have succeeded as a genre it needed to add new information to sculpture. But most of the work produced repeated past forms; its sole claim to attention was the fact that it was being done in clay for the first time. We do have the success of a group of ceramists I mentioned previously. Interestingly, they all work within a figurative mode, and in looking at these artists I am reluctant to claim them as part of the ceramics world. They are of ceramics in a secondary sense—but no more so than Mark di Suvero belongs to metal or Isamu Noguchi to landscape gardening. The true context of their work is figurative art, and it is in this context that their work takes on full meaning. Some of the artists refer directly to the history of the ceramic medium, and in a full analysis of their work these concerns should be taken into account.

The challenge then is to let go of this idea of ceramic sculpture as an independent genre and to see the better sculptural works as being part of larger fine-art concerns. This applies to some extent to the area of painting as well. But, whereas the relationship between sculpture and clay has been difficult and uneasy, a close and synergistic accord has developed with painting. This discipline has been the provider of many of the field's best ceramists: William De Morgan, Bernard Leach, William Staite Murray, Sam Haile, Robert Turner, and Peter Voulkos, to name a few. Furthermore, the painter has frequently taken on ceramics as a secondary medium and many have contributed important bodies of work: Paul Gauguin, Henry Varnum Poor, Lucio Fontana, Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró, Roy Lichtenstein, and more recently Helen Frankenthaler and Kenneth Noland.

As this interest has grown, particularly over the past decade, there has been the development of wall pieces that stand on the borderline of painting and ceramics. Margie Hughto's fan-shaped ceramic tablets, for example, seem closer to painting than ceramics. They are *of* ceramic, rather than *about* ceramics. The same is true of George Mason, who further blurs the distinction by working in and out of relief-sculpture traditions. The new painterly force in clay is not restricted to the wall, however. It is also felt in new (and not so new) expressions in vessel-making where the use of color, pattern, and composition is conversant with concerns in contemporary painting. So here, too, we must look at the umbrella of ceramics more closely. Some works are merely painterly and are primarily concerned with the genre of ceramics; others are ceramic and are primarily concerned with the genre of painting.

In the final analysis, it is only pottery that is unambiguous. This is an uninterrupted tradition and art form that extends back 7,000 years. Pottery is not a subcategory of any other discipline, it has its own extraordinary history and its own set of aesthetic imperatives. It is within this discipline that America's greatest achievement in ceramic art can be found. The American potter has profoundly influenced this millenia-long tradition, not only here but in England, Europe, and Japan as well. More than any other nation, America brought aesthetic risk-taking to a medium previously based on highly conservative and rigidly held aesthetic precepts. Potters such as Voulkos, Turner, and Rudolf Staffel have freed the medium from its craft obsessions and its preciousness. American pottery is unlike any other in its diversity of approach, informality, scale, and vigor of surface.

After nearly two decades of obscurity, this achievement is now being acknowledged and potter's work actively col-

Los Angeles-based Garth Clark is a historian, author, and dealer in nineteenth- and twentieth-century ceramic art. His fifth book, American Potters, *was published this year by Watson-Guptill Publications.*

lected. These collectors are not the cadre of craft collectors who so loyally supported potters in the beginning, but collectors of contemporary art who see pottery as one of the vital visual arts, alongside painting and sculpture. Museums such as the Denver Art Museum, St. Louis Museum of Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Minneapolis Institute of Art are purchasing vessels as part of their twentieth-century fine-art collections.

One reason for the change in the status of pottery is a change in the realm of patronage. For nearly eighty years, the university and other institutions of higher learning were the deciding factor in the well-being of ceramics. This dates from the founding in 1900 of the New York State College of Clayworking and Ceramics, when Charles Fergus Binns set the foundation for university support. This patronage has been problematical, as the university has never really been an enthusiastic supporter of the ceramic arts. Because of the medium's grassroots popularity, it was allowed to live on the fringes of the art department, usually poorly financed. With the exception of Alfred University, this patron has never taken many risks on behalf of the ceramic arts.

Concerning pottery in particular, the university proved to be actively hostile during the sixties, when ceramic sculpture swept into vogue with its promise of entrée to the modernist mainstream. In order to consolidate this resource, the so-called clay club developed. At its most positive pole, these informal groupings of ceramics-department heads provided a network for young graduates to find employment and for the passage of information. At its negative pole, it allowed for the pooling and manipulation of resources. Exhibitions in university galleries were traded for similar favors at other campuses. Schemes were devised to create impressive academic credentials among a limited group of associates by arranging lecture and workshop engagements for each other. At the time this was real power, as lecturing was the only substantial source of additional funding when few ceramists sold work regularly.

The difficulty with the clay club was this: Instead of being judged by their art, ceramists became most concerned about their political standing within the club, the quality of their workshop routines, and the collecting of academic credentials to ensure promotion or tenure. But as the university suffered its own crisis of survival, so too has it cooled as a patron. It has been replaced by a far healthier, but for some more intimidating patron—the marketplace.

The marketplace is a very different patron. For the first time, ceramists can look forward to earning more by making their art than by talking about it. The marketplace also differs from the university in that it is concerned with *quality,* not academic obedience. The pressure for performance is now in the studio, where it should be. The result is a more competitive environment for the making of art and far greater rewards for excellence.

The entire price structure of ceramics is now changing as a result. For pottery, the prices have been particularly encouraging. Five years ago, $500 would have been considered a handsome price for a pot. Stacked pots by Peter Voulkos now receive as much as $20,000 and his plates $6,000. Beatrice Wood's now fetch as much as $4,500 for exceptional pieces. Richard DeVore has been selling in the region of $2,500 to $6,000. And these are not isolated incidents. Shortly before his death, the English potter Hans Coper was receiving up to $20,000 for his major works. Many galleries and collectors predicted that the high prices were a flash in the pan and would soon plummet. But subsequent private sales and those at Sotheby's Belgravia have sustained these price levels.

The increase in prices has mainly benefitted established figures. The work of minor artists has hardly risen in price at all, while those who sell in the medium price range of $150 to $300 report a very real drop in their market. This points to a market that will support the best work, while interest in pottery and the crafts generally is beginning to decline among the more dilettante, middle-class audiences. Although I don't predict economic depression for the ceramist, there will certainly be a very real restriction in the number of artists the marketplace will support. This process will be painful, but it is also overdue and inevitable.

Private patronage has other advantages. The collector and the dealer can move quickly and adjust to subtle changes in the marketplace and they enable many artists to give up the dual role of teacher and maker. But they also have their drawbacks. Except for a few far-sighted individuals, these patrons do not encourage experiment as a rule. What is demanded of the artist today is most often what was sold yesterday. In this sense, the university was a good environment. Its indifference to ceramics allowed artists to make pretty much what they preferred; as a result, we find that most avant-garde ceramics over the past three decades were made under the aegis of the university.

With the rise of the gallery as a deciding force in ceramic art, we require new safeguards. To my way of thinking, the front line of defense is the encouragement of scholarship and criticism. More than ever, ceramists need sharp, pertinent analysis of their work to counter the constant danger of commercial interests becoming the sole judge of achievement. In looking toward this support, we have some reason for optimism. We have seen the establishment of a regular forum for critics and historians through international symposia, while the National Council for Education in the Ceramic Arts is attempting to raise its standards to the level of, say, the College Art Association.

Improvement in the literature of the field has been marginal, however. Perhaps the greatest hindrance to the development of criticism has been the craft press itself, which has taken a paternalistic view of the field, printing either passive description or gushing praise. Much remains to be done to improve the standard of writing and to educate those with the power to publish.

Ceramics has come a long way in terms of taking its place in the fine-arts community, though the struggle is far from won. With the lessening interest of the educational patron, we need to find new ways to stimulate investment in fresh ideas and concepts. With reduced funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, we also need to find new sponsors for exhibitions and publications. To some extent, the marketplace will meet these needs, but it will also pervert them. And so ceramics needs the astringent of strong, fearless criticism. We move into this decade with much achievement in the most crucial area—the creating of good ceramic art. The work of the potter is now finding its place in the fine-arts mainstream, while the ceramic sculptor has departed the clay club to be assimilated into the more realistic climate of sculpture proper. It is a time for redefinition on many levels. The 1990s will see ceramics in very different form from that of today; if we can provide the encouragement for growth, it will be even more challenging and accomplished.

Six at the Whitney: Kudos to Some

by Mady Jones

California clay finally gets its due as the Whitney Museum of American Art shows works by Arneson, Gilhooly, Mason, Price, Shaw, and Voulkos.

Cross-Form—White *by John Mason (1964), 67" (170.2 cm) high, glazed stoneware. Collection of the artist. Courtesy Hansen Fuller Goldeen Gallery, San Francisco, and Max Hutchinson Gallery, New York. Photo: Frank J. Thomas.*

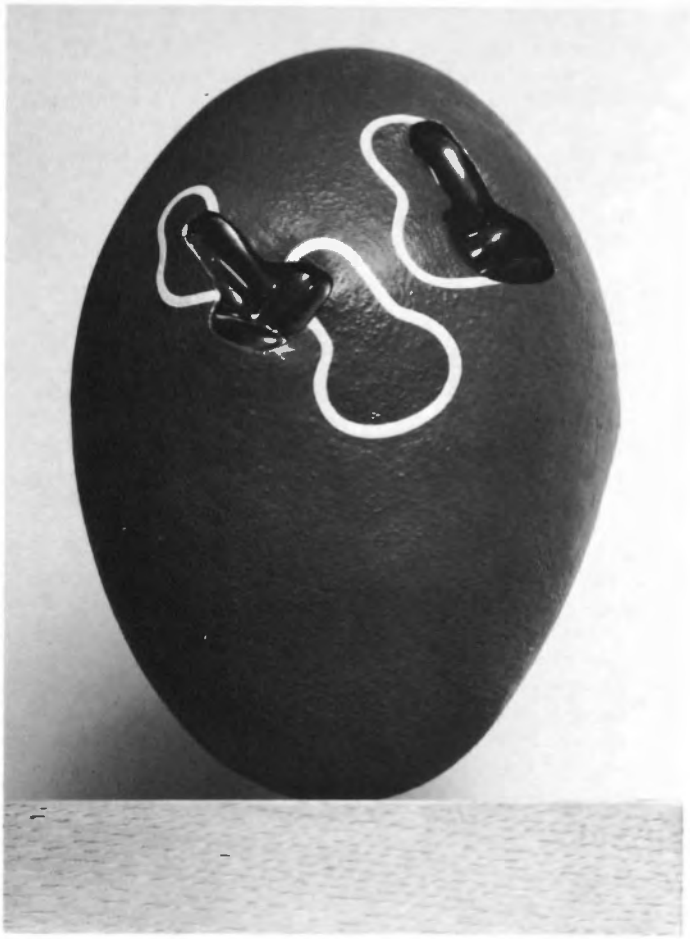
B.T. Blue *by Kenneth Price (1962) 10" (25.4 cm) high, lacquer and acrylic on stoneware. Collection of Becky and Peter Smith. Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.*

Untitled *by Peter Voulkos (1980), 48" (121.9 cm) high, stoneware. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. John Pappajohn. Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.*

Long relegated to the ranks of craftspeople by mainstream artists, and disavowed by craftspeople themselves for their break with traditional forms and methods, ceramic artists have had to fight an uphill battle for recognition. Within the last few years there has been a great deal more interest in clay, prevailing attitudes have changed somewhat, and the artistic breakthroughs of the last twenty-five years have been recognized. Yet even now clay is still considered somewhat left-field and peculiar to California. Even though the Whitney Museum of American Art is finally mounting the clay show this December that it should have done at least a decade before, and even though many mainstream artists and art dealers are collecting turn-of-the-century art pottery by George Ohr, clay is still a sleeper. Enough so that financial reporter Sylvia Porter recently recommended that her readers buy ceramic art as an exceedingly undervalued investment. The Whitney's exhibition, "Ceramic Sculpture: Six Artists," focuses on the work of Peter Voulkos, John Mason, Kenneth Price, Robert Arneson, David Gilhooly, and Richard Shaw—as I will in this essay.

It all started with Peter Voulkos, the Greek with the big long arms, and a handful of people working with him in Los Angeles in the late 1950s. This was the first generation of American ceramists to break away from European and Oriental traditions—a break facilitated by the post-war atmosphere of spontaneity and improvisation. Voulkos, a nationally known potter who had worked with Rudy Autio at the Archie Bray Foundation in Montana making production ware, was chosen to head the new ceramics department at Otis Art Institute. A powerfully built man with a magnetic personality, Voulkos was able to communicate the excitement of clay. He ran a freewheeling shop and prescribed no rules, so students were encouraged to stretch the medium. And Voulkos worked on a grand scale (some sculptures used as much as two tons of clay); before him most clay objects had been small and intimate, a limitation imposed by tradition and by kiln size. His method was to spin out the stoneware shapes he wanted and to epoxy them into complex, massive assemblages. Prevailing craft attitudes called for color to harmoniously fuse with form, but Voulkos created tension between form and color, the surface and texture of the pot thus becoming a "canvas in the round." His real genius came through in the way he slab-built, tore, dented, gouged, cracked, punctured, finger-scored, slit, and gashed his surfaces. Abstract Expressionism had come to ceramics: shape and surface were exploited for their expressive potential. Function did not determine form, the artist was no longer dependent on the potter's wheel.

The dialogue between John Mason and Peter Voulkos, like that between Braque and Picasso, was a crucial one. Mason, too, had worked for industry, producing pottery for Vernon Kilns of California, and this technical background enabled him to make great breakthroughs in his own work. One of Mason's six-foot rectangular slabs might not seem impressive to one ignorant of the properties of clay, but the fact that it did not explode in the kiln, cave in, warp, or topple over is a feat of engineering. During the fifties, Mason's stoneware pots seemed more restrained, full of latent power, compared to Voulkos's explosive, muscular pieces. Mason preferred monolithic shapes to Voulkos's multiform pieces, and for him color was an integral part of form. He, too, came to seek monumental scale in his work, producing his first huge wall pieces in 1957 by trailing long slabs of clay over one another in a Jackson Pollack kind of way. By this time Mason and Voulkos shared studio space on Glendale Boulevard, building an enormous kiln and sharing the hard labor of lifting and moving their massive art. Over the next several years, Mason's work evolved from Abstract Expressionism to address Minimalist concerns established in the early sixties by sculptor Tony Smith and



others. In this later work, shape and surface are one, and they refer neither to nature nor to the artist. Nevertheless, Mason's repertoire of forms—the rectangle, the cross, and the X—lack the hard-edge, machine-made character usually associated with Minimalism, as the sensuous, richly glazed surfaces have handformed, textural irregularities. Mason's forms are serene, heroic masses, evocative of Stonehenge slabs, pointing to a human presence.

Unlike Voulkos and Mason, Kenneth Price worked on a small scale, making elegantly crafted "L.A. School" *objets d'art.* He was the first to introduce brightly colored glazes into the changing aesthetic. In order to get the dazzling surfaces he wanted, Price began to use white earthenware clay bodies and low-fire glazes, a technical shift from the prevailing stoneware aesthetic that would revolutionize the ceramics of succeeding generations. Price studied with Voulkos for one year before going to the New York College of Clayworking and Ceramics at Alfred University to learn glazing techniques. His bright (almost gaudy) painted and glazed biomorphic forms, not unlike the Surrealist pod shapes of Miró, were the genuine synthesis of form and color; the form would be nothing without the color, and the color is dependent on a rounded surface. Last year, Price was featured on the cover of *Art in America,* a mainstream art publication that has long disregarded clay because of its humble origins. Ironically, the work being touted was *Happy's Curios,* Price's homage to Mexican folk pottery.

There is no doubt that Voulkos and his group threatened the status quo during the five years he taught at Otis (now the Los Angeles County Art Institute). Millard Sheets, head of Otis, rejected at least half the submissions to the 1958 student ceramics show because they did not fulfill his classical standards, and he admonished students "to get out of their ivory tower." Instead they opened The Ivory Tower, a gallery that exhibited the new work. Finally, in 1959 Voulkos was fired by Sheets, the same man who had hired him. Sheets could no longer tolerate the "radical pots" and the unorthodox work hours and methods. Voulkos was hired immediately by the University of California, Berkeley, and his new studio on Gilman Street in Berkeley became the social and artistic center for the region.

At the same time that Voulkos was at Berkeley, another clay revolution was in progress. The Funk Art movement led by Robert Arneson was partly nihilistic anti-art, and partly related to the New York Pop aesthetic of "see what a bad boy am I." During a throwing exhibition with traditional potter Tony Prieto in 1961, Arneson threw a pop bottle, placed a cap on it, and called it *No Return.* This marked his personal transition from Abstract Expressionism to Funk. During the mid-sixties, Arneson made his famous typewriter with fingernails for keys, the toaster with scorched fingers emerging from the slot, and *Call Girl,* a telephone with breasts. The visual pun, the gag, became synonymous with California Funk ceramics. The content or message was more important than the form, and much of the content was overwhelming.

Arneson recalls that when he was selected to be in a show of 100 California sculptors at the Kaiser Roof Garden in Oakland (1963), he felt he was number 100. "My ceramic sculptures were abstract with some Miró color and a Miró curlique, but they weren't forceful enough and had no philosophical point to make. How could I stand out there next to Voulkos and John Mason and be Bob Arneson?" It was while Arneson was seated, thinking about making the ultimate ceramic object, that he decided to do a "no holds barred" toilet. Arneson was asked to remove the toilet from the show after a Kaiser vice-president made it perfectly clear that "no artist is going to put down American capitalism in this show!" Arneson is always amazed at what people read into his work, but in truth the toilet was not easy to love. As a matter of fact, that same piece figured heavily in the divorce of the two prominent Sacramento collectors who had bought it.

In keeping with the figurative-painting tradition of northern California, it is not surprising that narrative ceramics came into their own in the mid-sixties. Bob Arneson began to teach at the University of California, Davis, in 1962; among his students were Richard Shaw and David Gilhooly. Shaw was doing earthenware animals, sofas, chairs, and vessels painted with surreal scenes. Beginning in 1971, Shaw collaborated on a body of porcelain assemblages with sculptor/painter Robert Hudson. The exhibition of this work at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art marked a turning point in clay sculpture, not only because of the objects' sheer elegance, but because they were slip cast. Shaw's latest work, his stick figures, are *trompe-l'oeil* triumphs that acknowledge the pottery tradition of wares made to resemble another material (bamboo, wood, twine, basketry, to name a few) and refer to the painterly concerns of American realists William Harnett and John Peto. The head might be a rusty Old Dutch Cleanser can, a torso coffee pot pokes fun at functionalism, but they are so perfectly reproduced in clay you have to tap them to realize they are not the real items. Indeed, you are awed that nothing is as it seems. Rather, the whole sculpture is made of found objects transformed into clay, visual puns slip-cast in porcelain, elegantly executed. The alligator for a shoe, the whittled stick for a limb, it is the juxtaposition of elements and the surprise of illusion that catches you off guard and rivets your attention to detail. Shaw's trademark playing cards are strewn about with his signature No. 2 pencils and scraps of newspaper—tantalizing bits of wire-service clippings about dogs devouring their masters or bizarre snatches from "Dear Abby." Urbane and witty,

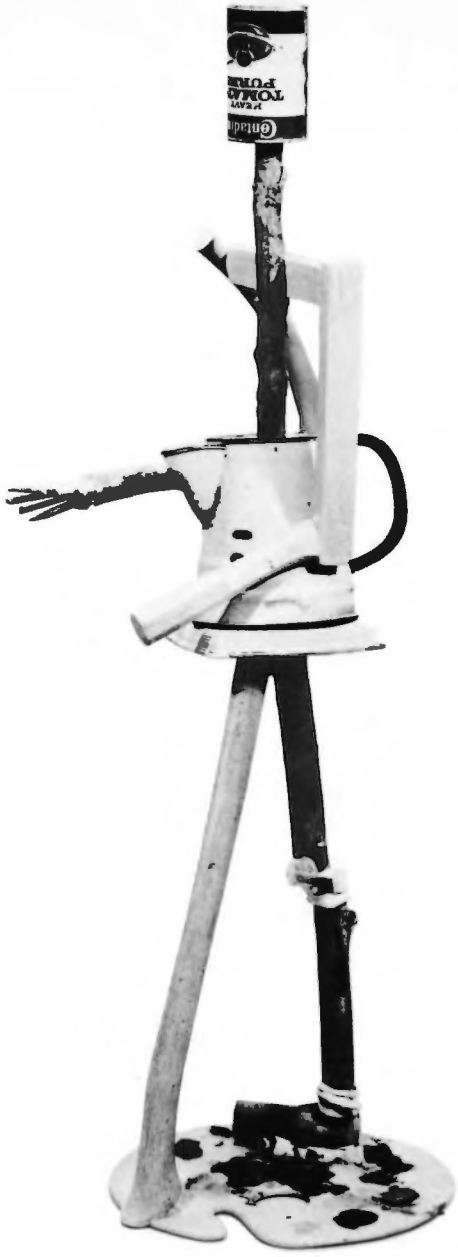
these robotlike junk men are far removed from Funk ceramics of the sixties.

David Gilhooly, a sci-fi freak and perpetrator of myths, has great populist appeal. His work is colorful, clever, and funny; the man on the street can laugh along with him. Gilhooly, best known for his frog civilization that has been growing since the sixties, first created African mythologies and portraits of the dogs of Sacramento Valley friends in papier mâché. He had an uncanny knack for capturing the personality of the master in the likeness of the dog. The frogs came about accidentally, at the end of his African stint. Gilhooly had made some frogs for a watering hole with speckled rhinos, and he happened to have one left over. He put it in the bottom of a cup as a joke, thus tying himself to a tradition seen in Babylonian, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and European folk pottery. He suggests this might be the cultural universal anthropologists have always searched for—something all cultures share. There is no way to take it except as a joke, and that is what his work is about—laughing at ourselves. The frog civilization parallels and mimics our own, and is populated with such historical and religious figures as Frog Victoria, Mao Tse-Toad, Frog Moses, and Frog Buddha, among many others.

Two other important figures in the history of modern clay who are not included in the Whitney show should be mentioned here. Ron Nagle, an artist's artist whose glaze formulas are in all the textbooks (usually without acknowledgement), has for fifteen years conducted his own investigation of the cup form. Along with Ken Price, Nagle inspired ceramists to explore color and abstract form. His reductivist cups with handbuilt walls, spattered paint, flowing glazes, and vestigial handles are fired twenty times or more. They are the very essence of cups, with soul and style and elegance.

Viola Frey, a true maverick, took a big risk by not exhibiting her work for the past five years. In 1981, she emerges as one of our major clay artists. Frey chose to keep her work around her because she needed to have it there in order to grow. Her grandmother figures are powerful women, oversize and awesome, but they are also familiar, like the ladies who ride the bus wearing hats and brightly colored dresses. Viola Frey mixes the techniques of painting and sculpture, her stereotypical forms come alive with glazes that are so vibrant they almost separate from the form.

Mady Jones is a free-lance writer living in San Francisco. Parts of this article appeared in different form in San Francisco Magazine, *June 1981.*



Whistling in the Dark *by Robert Arneson (1976), 35¼" (89.5 cm) high, terra cotta and glazed ceramic. Collection Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Gift of Frances and Sydney Lewis. Photo: Jerry Thompson.*

Tantric Frog Buddha Camping Out *by David Gilhooly (1976), 26½" (67.3 cm) high, glazed earthenware. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Robert H. Shoenberg. Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.*

Figure on a Palette *by Richard Shaw (1980), 39" (99.1 cm) high, porcelain with underglaze, glaze, and overglaze transfers. Private collection. Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.*

Toward a Bicameral Aesthetic of Clay

by Matthew Kangas

Criticism surrounding clay is in disarray. The gaping inadequacies of the few critical methodologies extant have forced the issue to be raised: Can a single encompassing critical approach to clay be formulated at all? Conversely, *should* a special case necessarily be made for clay, or should the character of such discourse be subsumed within a general aesthetic—say, one which we already work from, each of us in our own way, while inspecting and responding to any work of art?

These questions are not easily answered. To disregard the role of the medium—the clay itself—in shaping forms and in creating an appropriate criticism would unnecessarily diminish its historical achievements in applied-arts tradition. Yet a special class of clay criticism must be combined with current and evolving critical modes in order to better address the range of issues clay may now embrace: image, social placement, iconography, function, social criticism, and ideology.

Part of the reason a sufficiently compelling philosophy of clay—I mean a way of looking at it and even judging it—has not arisen rests in the different way clay has emerged as a thread of our cultural fabric. I need not reiterate here the long historical legacy of pottery or clay figurines or how all that has unalterably molded the nature of our own responses to comparable objects today. That academic, art-historical backfilling—very necessary, no doubt about it—has ironically dictated the form clay criticism has taken in recent years. That is, predominating clay commentary, analysis, or criticism have been shaped by a hyperconsciousness of one particular aspect of the medium, vesselmaking.

I care to argue here for a bicameral approach. The morass of language smothering clay must be channeled into at least two "rooms"—sculptural and vessel—and taken out of a single, stifling closet. Picture a cutaway view of a house with two rooms side-by-side, connected by a free-swinging door. In one room, purely functional objects are stored, some of which resemble functional things—jugs, pots, cups, archaeological and architectural relics, and all types of holders—but because of their size or exaggerated appurtenances are only superficially functional. The other room is full of sculptural objects made of clay: dolls, figurines, statuary, entire walls, and decorative tablets, as well as more archaeological treasures that serve no functional purpose to speak of. These odds and ends, however, by virtue of their sole *decorative* function, point toward meanings and interpretations usually only associated with paintings and sculptures of stone or metal. Together these rooms form the bicameral, that is, two-chambered, house of clay. This dual construction will consist of functional and nonfunctional considerations side by side, it will undertake to elucidate and evaluate vessel and nonvessel art made with clay, and it may conceivably elicit a more comprehensive revelation of the medium.

The waning primacy of vessel criticism is partly due to a rising awareness of the full plurality of the medium's history . The purely sculptural accomplishments in clay, for example, are every bit as towering throughout history as the achievements of functional forms. This broader picture of clay takes into consideration the role of vessels in a nonritual, nonspiritual context, and seeks a rationale for the economic, social, and political dimensions of clay. The significance of Portuguese majolica nativities or Hispano-Moresque luster plates lies not only in the evolution of glazes—the teacup fancier's view—but in the role those objects played in their respective societies. It also lies in their meaning for us today. For clay has an inextricable relationship to political and social institutions, both past and present. It is a gripping, fascinating tale too important to leave to connoisseurs or anthropologists. It is a task that serious art criticism is only beginning to attack.

The sculptural, nonfunctional continuum, a parallel and equally surging stream in ceramics, must also be immersed in this new ideological context. The development of the formula for porcelain at Meissen is important only to the degree it reflects the level of German scientific and economic development in the early eighteenth century. The vast production of northern European tableware is meaningful to the extent that we can compose a picture of that society by creating an iconography of its tableware decoration. Likewise, the extraordinary production of German religious statuary not only displays a comparable assembly of fertile images to be interpreted, it represents the central place of ceramic art in European institutions of the period: economic, social, and religious.

All the same, the impossibility of accurately recreating the atmosphere of history's ritual vessels or porcelain Madonnas is one reason a bicameral aesthetic of clay must be given a try. The dual nature of such an approach could—like a cell dividing—lead to a newer, more comprehensive understanding of clay's presence in humanity's home. For instance, it might elaborate upon both functional and

nonfunctional aspects of a particular object. A teacup's rim decoration and that particular meaning within the history of ornamental iconography are equally if not more important than the presence or absence of the teacup's handle. Similarly, the origins and meaning of pastoral or maritime scenes on a Genoese fish platter ought to be considered within an iconographic, excavative history of European art. The platter's curved or braided handles and the level of preindustrial technology they embody are another part of their total, bicameral meaning. So is their relation to the development of labor and management in Italian potteries of the period.

Unlike fire, its helpmate, clay has been ripped from its original, primordial context aeons ago. Its overriding meaning to us—as art, as icon, as demographic statistic, as mug—must begin with its complex social functions and relationships.

Given this, a bicameral aesthetic of clay does not toss out function. Function is the handmaiden of work. The narrowly focused lens of china connoisseurship has tended to neglect work's relation to clay and in pursuit of the *objet d'art* has overlooked clay's functional heritage. Given a new critical framework, restaurant cups are as important as *raku* teacups used in Zen ceremony. Given a new social unification, tilemaker and tile-setter are as important as the master craftsmaker worrying about tenure; the Gentleman Potter of eighteenth-century England is as important as the contemporary production-ware potter. "Work" is not a dirty word when it comes to clay; neither is "production"; neither is "function." By reincorporating these terms into a new aesthetic of clay, one can reinvigorate its criticism.

I cannot deny the seeming loggerheads to which a bicameral aesthetic of clay may lead. Some will insist clay be confined to a narrow history, that the Flame of the Vessel must be held forever aloft and protected as fiercely as the Greeks guarded the Fire at Olympia. Metaphysically oriented criticisms of art have always placed metaphorical conceptions high above the objects themselves. In the long run, they diminish clay's significance as art by whittling down the object's importance in favor of Spirit, Soul, or some other abstract virtue or moral imperative.

The delicately important thing to admit is the likelihood that critical judgments against the accomplishments of contemporary clay artists will get worse—even harsher—before they get better. This has nothing to do with clay's having been treated like the forgotten stepsister to Cor-Ten steel or anything like that. As with photography, the real reason probably has more to do with the great numbers of people doing things with it at this time. Achievement may indeed be the most important thing to bear in mind, as critic Clement Greenberg pointed out in an address at Syracuse University.[1] Nevertheless, clay's achievements can never be understood in quite the same way Greenberg understands the paintings of Kenneth Noland or Helen Frankenthaler. That is to say, Greenberg's praise of "achievement" vaguely sidesteps clay's many manifestations beyond the purely medium-related aesthetic that is at the base of Greenberg's view of modern art. His championing of the Abstract Expressionists and the Post-Painterly Abstractionists revolved around their emphasis on the nature and presence of paint itself, referring to what paint can physically do to a flat canvas, not on what the paint was used to depict or transmit. His elevation of such questionable masters as Noland and Jules Olitski was connected to a conviction that their triumphant concentration on the flat, inviolable nature of the canvas was part of what comprised their significance as artists. Thus, despite the flattery of having so distinguished (and controversial) an art-world figure give his belated imprimatur to clay, the validity of that compliment must be seen in the light of Greenberg's overall writings. Such an examination can only lead to the conclusion that it was an implicit endorsement of an art that sticks to medium-based, clay-for-clay's-sake traditions, rather than one that seeks to break away from or expand the medium's boundaries. Today's art critics, who cast a wider net, seek to encompass contexts beyond Greenberg's "truth to medium" and aim to grapple with issues broader than formalism or materialism.

Clay's importance in this cultural drama must be wrenched from false hierarchies of medium or material, even if this may at first seem to lessen clay's significance rather than enhance it. Uncle Tom-style integration or safe assimilation into the art world are not desiderata. An independent, parallel availability for viewers, makers, critics, and users is one ideal. What seems sure is not that clay is on the verge of some great new era, but that criticism (the *New York Times* notwithstanding[2]) finally appears to be catching up with clay.

Metaphor, a much-touted critical tool, ostensibly lends literary connotations to art, thereby giving it the quick illusion of deep meaning. Profoundly understood, metaphor is a timebomb waiting to explode: it can go off in any direction. Improperly understood, it places meaning where none exists.

Taken to one geophysical extreme, Mount St. Helens' crater now best demonstrates the Vessel's ultimate possibility as a container of space. Beside such an overwhelming example of majesty and mud, contemporary clay vessels' metaphorical level shrivels to souvenir status. Anything, in short, can carry a metaphor. The comical implications in the "vessel as metaphor" slogan have crept directly out of its insufficiently encompassing matrix for discussing the entire range of contemporary clay. The proposals made here seek to circumvent its weaknesses and, if such a thing is possible, amplify its strengths.

The ideology of a medium is the ideology of its maker; clay's future, finally, lies in the hands of the artist. Clay can, however, also express the ideology of the viewer, the user, and the critic. Here there need be no pat equivalencies such as "vessel as metaphor" or "medium equals meaning." Only by admitting the bicamerality of the medium—and then getting on with the business of interpreting and appreciating—can an illuminating aesthetic of this or any other function-based art be achieved. Let that process of introspection and subsequent action truly begin.

1. Clement Greenberg, "The Status of Clay," Transactions of the Ceramics Symposium 1979 *(Los Angeles: Institute for Ceramic History, 1980).*
2. Graham Marks, "An Open Letter to the New York Times*,"* The Shards Newsletter: *Review of Published Resources in the Ceramic Arts 1, no. 1 (Spring 1980). A letter protesting Vivian Raynor's review of the Brookfield Craft Center in the* New York Times, *July 22, 1979.*

For R.H.S.
The author wishes to acknowledge conversations with Professors Howard Kottler of the University of Washington and Donald B. Kuspit of the State University of New York, Stony Brook, on these and other topics which led to the formulation of this essay.

Matthew Kangas is a lecturer in twentieth-century art and literature at the University of Puget Sound/Seattle. He is a regular contributor to Vanguard *and* Art in America, *and has also written on Pacific Northwest ceramics for* American Craft. *Copyright 1981 Matthew Kangas.*

Untitled *by Robert Sperry (1981), 16" (40.7 cm) high, clay. Courtesy of artist and Erica Williams/Arner Johnson Gallery, Seattle. Photo: Ed Marquand.*

First Things First

Some second thoughts on how we view clay today.

by Michael McTwigan

With the Whitney Museum of American Art's current exhibition, "Ceramic Sculpture: Six Artists," the forgotten ceramist finally has his day—*her* day is yet to come. But does he? Has the art world finally learned to love the humble pot? Not exactly. There are no vessels in this show, only "sculptures." And only sculptors need apply to enter the museum's sacred chambers (unless of course the artist "paints" with clay; that's all right, too). Ceramists themselves are not deaf to these admission requirements. For a decade or more, many have been making "sculptures" and not ceramics. The art world will grant admission only to those artists who play by its rules.

Perhaps even more harmful than the art world's myopia is that of the middle class. You are sure to find in "proper" living rooms a Chinese blue-and-white ginger jar, a *famille verte* vase, or reproductions of the same. These ceramics are the most popular because they are the most tasteful, because they fit so unobtrusively into the décor of middle-class good taste.

Much work lies ahead for those of us who wish to bring this art to a wider audience. Indeed, even those viewers who are willing to meet clay on its own terms must be frustrated in their desire for deeper understanding. Where can they gain the insights of clay artists or critics? What books can they read to gain historical perspective? What exhibitions can they visit that explore in depth an idea, a tradition, or a theme in ceramics? It is true that a few individuals have managed, against great odds, to make themselves heard, to contribute to our understanding. But they are so few, indeed. Those of us who have dedicated our careers to art in general and clay in particular are bewildered by this tremendous gap between the advanced achievements of its artists and the inexpert interpretations of its audience.

Traditional art theory has examined art as an object, not as an experience of the subject. It is quick to say which qualities of proportion, color, verisimilitude, and harmony make for good art; it is less willing to say what the viewer's experience of that art might be. There are two fundamentally opposed ways of approaching art, and both are valuable so long as neither is dominant. One is information based; it regards art as communication and therefore requires the viewer to be knowledgeable, to understand its code. (The most recent manifestation of this approach to art is semiotics.) The other way to get at art is by "being there," by confronting it face to face with our bodies and (perhaps secondarily) our minds. The senses are what count here, and the viewer must be "open" and "responsive."

There are many ways in which ceramics must first be understood before they can be appreciated, and this requires the viewer to understand the ceramist's formal vocabulary. The most obvious example, though not the most important, is knowing something of the processes by which ceramics are made, so the viewer may distinguish a well-executed piece of work from a careless one. More to the point, however, are elements such as texture: what character or mood is the artist trying to establish with a roughly combed surface versus a smooth and glossy one? In other words, in ceramics as in, say, music there is a given range of effects with which the artist must work, and which the audience must itself be familiar with if it is to comprehend the work.

In addition to knowing the ceramist's technical and formal vocabulary, it is helpful to have some understanding of ceramics traditions. The myths, memories, and other cultural traditions called up by a given work of art must be identified and appreciated before we can fully appreciate the work itself. By calling for a re-evaluation of pottery's decorative nature, George Woodman points to just such a fault in the way we perceive contemporary ceramics. The decoration of a ceramic piece is rarely considered; instead, all critical eyes focus on its form, and this only superficially.

For example, if the vessel or sculpture resembles some well-known precedent—let us say an African storage jar or an Olmec figurine—that is enough for us to say "it symbolizes the ritual vessel/sculpture of an ancient culture," and leave it at that. The critic intones those weighty words—"evocative," "primitive," "classical"—while all nod in approval. But what is being evoked? What message, what myth, what power is transmitted? As Matthew Kangas points out in his essay, Mount St. Helens could be claimed as the ultimate metaphorical vessel, but is that what volcanoes really mean to us?

Ancient art objects have plenty to tell us; they read like histories of their cultures. We must remember, however, that ritual art was not complete without its ritual, that the objects themselves are only the physical remains of a larger, often spiritual experience. Modern ceramics also may convey a multitude of meanings, if we can discover them. Here the blame lies mostly with critics, who repeat their stock phrases without taking the trouble to investigate the object for further meaning. The need for knowledge—aesthetic, cultural, historical—is summed up well by E.H. Gombrich:

We may enjoy this challenge to our imagination and relish the sense of mystery that is aroused in us by what looks remote, exotic, and inscrutable. This is one of the reasons why our age is so ready, as Malraux says, "to admire all it does not understand." But we may come to see that our fathers and grandfathers were not quite wrong, after all, when they thought that we understand certain styles better than others. That a Rembrandt self-portrait or a Watteau drawing "means more" to us than an Aztec idol or a Negro mask. Not that we need forego the pleasure of looking at stimulating forms even where we do not understand. We also look at rocks or driftwood. Only we must try to relearn the difference between stimulation through self-projection, which, when applied to art, so often passes for "appreciation," and that enrichment that comes from an understanding, however dim and imperfect, of what a great work of art is intended *to convey.*[1]

And so we must know (as Kangas argues) what role the wine jar played in Greek life, what beliefs were bound up with the Olmec figurine, what messages are carried by the tiles of Arabic calligraphy encircling a mosque.

This leads us to perhaps the most common failure of art audiences: we all too often misunderstand or dismiss an art form because we do not appreciate what it is trying to do. How can we judge whether someone is playing a game well or poorly unless we know the game being played? We must know the artist's intentions, not only so we may measure skill (achievement relative to intention), but in order to learn what brought the work into

being; what do the artist's life, temperament, and thoughts tell us of the art; what experience does the artist want us to come away with?

There is another side to this argument, however. Let neither the artist's nor the critic's interpretation of a work of art be the final one. Artists often intend more than they know, while critics, because their influence is so great, must not be so quick to judge "good" art from "bad." The audience is the final critic; it cannot leave the task of experiencing and interpreting art to mediators, including this one. If it does, it has had no genuine experience of art whatsoever.

What is particularly bothersome about craft criticism is that it is more often devotional rather than insightful. In an ebullient tone, we are assured that what we see is genuine, worthy of our attention, and our money. Characteristic of an art with an "inferiority complex,"[2] its proponents seem fixed on reassuring the world at large that this is a safe investment, that even the most prestigious museums find it worthy of their collections. But if craft truly aspires to art, then many of its artists, collectors, and critics will have to take more risks than they have so far. Even more important, each should consider art an opportunity for individual expression, not as a way of certifying their good taste.

Which leads us to the sense-oriented or phenomenological approach to art. T.S. Eliot bridges the gap between these two approaches nicely when he argues that the purpose of acquiring knowledge

is not primarily that we should be able to project ourselves into a remote period, that we should be able to think and feel, when reading the poetry, as a contemporary of the poet might have thought and felt, though such experience has its own value; it is rather to divest ourselves of the limitations of our own age, and the poet, whose work we are reading, of the limitations of his *age, in order to get the direct experience, the immediate contact with his poetry.*[3]

Art *is* more than a historical document, and we must not equate the meaning of every work of art with the "spirit" of its age. At one time, art was a visible manifestation of god's power and humankind's faith. It was then easy to discern the spirit (and Spirit) of a work. But in this age of disbelief, where the power of imagination has replaced the power of faith,[4] art has as many meanings as it has viewers.

Art is a fiction, and viewing art is the willingness to live a fiction.[5] Two forms of empathic projection follow from this (or lead to it?). The first is essential and without it art would not exist, for the art object is mute, meaningless, until brought to life by the viewer. ("The world about us would be desolate except for the world within us," notes Wallace Stevens.[6]) There is no better example of this vital relationship between object and subject than Leo Stein's encounter with a ceramic plate:

I put on the table a plate of the kind common in Italy, an earthenware plate with a simple pattern in color, and this I looked at every day for minutes or for hours. I had in mind to see it as a picture, and waited for it to become one. In time it did. The change came suddenly when the plate as an inventorial object . . . a certain shape, certain colors applied to it . . . went over into a composition to which all these elements were merely contributory. The painted composition on the plate ceased to be on *it but became a part of a larger composition which was the plate as a whole. I had made a beginning to seeing pictorially.*[7]

What Leo Stein was able to do by contemplation, by intimate contact with the work, artists themselves do while creating the work.[8] Modernist art, in its efforts to speak abstractly (including but not limited to pure color, pure form, pure material), has in a sense made art accessible to all people. We all see "pictorially" whether we are gazing at clouds, driftwood, or an earthenware plate. Without prior knowledge, Leo Stein was able to experience that earthenware plate as a consummate work of art, a work dependent on skillful potting, a sophisticated sense of design, a sure hand capable of painting accurately, and so forth. Stein was not hampered by his ignorance of its symbolism—the oak leaf representing faith, virtue, and fortitude, for example—or by not knowing that such plates were a luxury owned only by the wealthy until several centuries after their introduction. In summary, we do not have to know all in order to experience art. Indeed, its marvelous, almost magical quality exists only because we do *not* know all. Those who insist that experiencing art is a matter of breaking the code alienate most potential viewers of art by making them feel inadequate to the task of meeting it face to face.

Imagine that you have entered a museum where dozens of ceramics are dramatically displayed in semidarkness. Standing silently before each piece are groups of two or three people, seemingly awed by the presentation. You join one of these, gaze intently for awhile, and are moved to speak by what you see. But as you begin to utter your thought or feeling, all turn to you disapprovingly—"Shush!" Apparently, one does not talk here. You move on. Noticing that the works are on open shelves, you lift one to feel its shape and sleek surface. A guard immediately approaches: "Handling the objects is not permitted!" Frustrated by this museum where everything seems forbidden, you leave.

This is the situation today. We stand in hushed silence before these untouchable icons, but we may not probe them for their meanings. We accept their sovereignty "on faith," and may not ask our hows, whys, wheres, or whens. Nor may we discover these provocative objects for ourselves; the interpretations of mediators and tastemakers must suffice. Is it any wonder that the ceramist must play pretender to the throne, or artless and humble serf, to gain our approval?

1. E.H. Gombrich, "André Malraux and the Crisis of Expressionism," Meditations on a Hobby Horse *3rd ed. (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 1978), p. 85.*

2. An unsigned article in Fortune *(December 1937) was titled, "Ceramics: The Art with the Inferiority Complex." See: Garth Clark,* A Century of Ceramics in the United States, 1878–1978 *(New York: E.P. Dutton, 1979), pp. 96–97.*

3. T.S. Eliot, "The Frontiers of Criticism," On Poetry and Poets *(New York: The Noonday Press, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1961), pp. 130–31.*

4. Wallace Stevens, "The Relations between Poetry and Painting," The Necessary Angel *(New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1942), p. 171.*

5. This concept of art and art viewing I first encountered in the writings of Carter Ratcliff, "Art Criticism: Other Minds, Other Eyes," published serially in Art International *during 1974 and 1975. Donald Kuspit later repeated the idea in an interview with Al Stubbs.*

6. Op. cit., p. 169.

7. Leo Stein, "On Reading Poetry and Seeing Pictures," Appreciation *(New York: Crown Publishers, 1947), p. 103.*

8. A second way of being in empathy with art comes into play here: the game of re-creating in our minds, upon viewing the work, the artist's original creative act. Admittedly, this is a recent form of viewer participation, and is of secondary importance. In fact, a full appreciation of craft-based art has been hindered by this very response. Too often, our energies are spent trying to determine the artist's method of construction or decoration, thereby reducing a sublime experience to a practical problem.

Ron Nagle: An Interview

by Susan Wechsler

Bottle with Stopper *(1960), 23¾" (60.3 cm) high, earthenware. Marer Collection, Scripps College, Claremont, California. Photo: Paul Soldner.*

Ron Nagle was born in 1939 in San Francisco and attended San Francisco State College (BA, 1962). He has taught at the San Francisco Art Institute, University of California at Berkeley, California College of Arts and Crafts at Oakland, and currently teaches at Mills College in Oakland.

Nagle has always nurtured a passionate interest in music, writing songs, and playing keyboard with bands. His first album, Bad Rice, *was issued by Warner Brothers in 1970, and since then he has produced songs recorded by The Tubes, Barbra Streisand, and Jefferson Starship. Currently, Nagle has his own production company, Proud Pork Productions, which he formed with Scott Matthews, also his partner on a recent release,* Durocs, *for Capitol, EMI.*

Nagle was moved by the brightly colored ceramic sculptures of Ken Price in the late fifties and went on to work with Peter Voulkos and Jim Melchert at Berkeley. In 1961, he and Melchert changed the clay facility at the San Francisco Art Institute to whiteware, setting a tone for what would become a new movement in ceramics. His unique use of china paint to build layers of color, sometimes requiring twenty to thirty firings, had a profound effect on the popularity of the low-fire medium. Through elaborate layering of airbrushed color, Nagle carefully builds a painterly surface, achieving a saturation and depth of color unprecedented in clay.

In his highly stylized sculptured cup forms, Nagle has been able to evoke the looseness of Japanese ceramics, the spontaneity of Abstract Expressionist painting, and the structure of architecture, along with the California pop culture of cars, surfboards, and swimming pools.

When I was a kid growing up in San Francisco, the thing that really moved me was the stuff that was going on in the fifties. I'm totally a product of that, from the whole mentality of what stardom means to my first sense of style. It all revolved around music. I'd fall asleep with rhythm and blues on the radio, listening to it under my pillow with the volume down low. It was heaven. It was the first time I had been really moved in an emotional way by anything you could call an art form, although no one thought it was at the time. My interest in music got me interested in the changing styles of the fifties. My father's business was in the Mission District, and I became obsessed with ethnic fashion. I wanted to be a Mexican; they invented the style of the fifties: the costuming, the pegged pants, pink and black, a certain kind of shoe. I went to special stores and got "peggers," and I had a flattop. My father freaked out. He thought I looked like a Mexican. I thought it was great. I was always interested in people's images and how they carried themselves; people who knew who they were appealed to me.

I wanted to be hip. My punk phase eventually evolved into beatnik, which was more involved with jazz. In high school, it was real cool to go down to North Beach and hang out at the Coexistence Bagel Shop, or sneak a copy of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* into your room. Around that whole scene, too, was "modern jewelry"—people were making stuff. I'd buy old silver knives and forks and spoons, beat them up, grind them, and make them into kidney shapes. No matter what I did at the time, I'd make a kidney shape! That's what has always been interesting to me about the crafts movement—they always bastardize ten generations later what was going on in mainstream art. What was Arp or Brancusi eventually became the mobile in the dentist's office. Nobody knew the real sources.

I had a little knowledge of what ceramics was about from what my mother had told me. She's a housewife, but she had done traditional china painting. There was a club, and all the ladies had meetings in my basement and made Santa Claus mugs—like today, but now they call it art. After jewelry, I took a ceramics course in high school. My teacher turned me on to Seymour Lochs at San Francisco State College, who was a far-out guy, a really original sculptor, and a great teacher. He was the first person to inform me that I was an "object" person and should pursue that.

Also a friend of mine, Rick Gomez, liked my jewelry and said if I showed

Susan Wechsler is a ceramic artist and writer living in New York City. This year she received a Services to the Field grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

This interview is excerpted from Low-Fire Ceramics: A New Direction in American Clay, *just published by Watson-Guptill Publications, New York. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.* © 1981 Susan Wechsler.

him what I knew, he'd show me what he knew about ceramics; he also knew about art. We'd go to parties at the San Francisco Art Institute and really loved being part of that scene. God, here were guys making giant canvases, three inches thick—you know, Kerouac and all that stuff. I was attracted to the scene and to the romantic idea of being a painter. In the fifties, the hippest thing you could be was a jazz musician or a painter; being an artist was real boss stuff.

I got hooked, and became voracious to know what was going on in mainstream art. But the sculpture at the time was pretty lame. I was looking for some kind of approach to sculpture through a material. I chose ceramics because it had a quality that really hadn't been explored. If you handled the stuff properly, and you were adept stylistically, you could make really direct things that you could never do with anything else. I got attracted through the pottery aspect at first. But the general pottery tradition was considered to be Marguerite Wildenhain, Bernard Leach, or Tony Prieto, and all those secret-glaze-notebook idiots. They were the fucking enemy. I had to stay in the corner and out of sight, making deals; I could do my own work if I did the assignments. The attitude they had toward anybody who deviated from the "tradition" was so bad. If anybody was the enemy, it was the ceramics movement—a great deal of mediocrity was perpetuated by it.

But something was abuzz. Pete Voulkos was involved, but we really didn't know what it was, and *Craft Horizons* wasn't showing a lot of new stuff. When Henry Takemoto came to San Francisco to teach a course at the art institute, I knew he was a friend and student of Pete's so I signed up immediately. He showed slides of the work from the guys in L.A.: Voulkos, Billy Al Bengston, John Mason, Michael Frimkess, Ken Price. When I saw those pictures, I was hooked, I was speechless, I got goose bumps. You have to understand that if you were involved in clay at that time, there was only one kind—all stoneware and all boring, every cliché in the book. I was totally saved by seeing those slides. There was a new aesthetic, a new immediacy, that really stretched what the material could do, and I realized that technique and process were totally irrelevant to the main issue. I also saw the Japanese Momoyama stuff and that really sewed it up. It was asymmetrical and didn't subscribe to the notion that the walls had to be even, or the bottom thin, or the glaze celadon! All these things gave me an alternative.

I look for things in work that move me. It goes beyond the material; it has to do with the fact that somebody is a stylistic virtuoso. There is some soul in the articulation; there is an assuredness, a directness; there's a little kink to it that sets that person's style apart from somebody else's. I'm very concerned with style. When Pete came to San Francisco, he had a first-class act. It wasn't just the way he handled the stuff, it wasn't just his invention, his position as a pioneer—it was because he had class. When he lays down a line, he puts it down right.

I was making stuff that was part Takemoto and part Voulkos, and part what I thought I remembered. Pete took me under his wing and gave me a job at Berkeley. I had gone through every style you could think of except figurative or narrative stuff, which I have a problem both making and appreciating. I was attracted to what was going on in L.A. We'd make pilgrimages to the Ferus Gallery, a real elite, European-type salon, which showed the top L.A. guys: Price, Bengston, Larry Bell, Ed Kienholz, and Robert Irwin. A lot of work was slick, in Bengston's case airbrushed, with a different aesthetic, the whole "finish fetish," intimate-object thing.

I liked the intimate work; I was painting all this time, Abstract Expresssionist stuff like Franz Kline, Mark Rothko, et cetera, but I graduated toward people like Antonio Tapies, Giorgio Morandi, Joseph Cornell. I'm very object oriented, obviously, and that's where the vestiges of the ceramics tradition come in. Ceramics is the victim of so much prejudice because it's made out of dirt, because there's a confusion about utility that comes from the "form follows function" mentality. The vessel format is a format for expression; a few of us at the time were appreciative of the object and we wanted to be involved with that. Not only was that not cool, but Abstract Expressionism also meant big, bold, and tough. By doing low-fire ceramics we got a lot of shit about making pansy art. We'd say, "No it ain't heavy, but it's something else!"

It's all a matter of dynamics; ceramics can be anything. The ceramic format has bowls, plates, whatever—more tangibles to work with dynamically speaking. You have the lip, the foot, the middle, the handle—all those things can take on different, nontraditional proportions, or be assembled or constructed. I made component parts for sculpture and put the pieces together, and they'd move in a certain way.

For me, it was the cup format. I'm interested in the fact that cups are open. There's a whole play indigenous to ceramics: the concept of volume, and thinness, and the illusion of volume, being able to cast, and the fact that it is a container with the appearance of bulk that has mass, but is composed of thin walls. Other stuff comes into play: it's ceremonial, it contains something, it's associated with some sort of social activity. But this isn't something I conceptualize; the fastest way to kill something is to analyze it. This is just artistic bullshit, after the fact. You gravitate toward whatever moves you and then you run with it. It was all intuitive. The fun of working is when what you're trying to do evolves and is never boring; every time, I'm just trying to get it right. I'm attracted to the format emotionally. It's appealing to me on a real dumb, basic level.

I was immediately drawn to what Price was doing. It was the most well-intentioned work I had seen in terms of directness, and quite separate from the rest of the contemporary ceramics movement. The mainstream ceramics hotshots didn't understand, and certainly the mainstream art people didn't understand; they're just starting to get it now! He was some guy who was making grandma five-and-dime ware and getting it from both sides. He was an innovator, a poet, and a real artist. The fact that he dared to use earthenware in the stoneware era, that he dared to make the colors bright instead

Untitled Cup (Miniyama Series)
(1980), 2⅞" (7.3 cm) high, earthenware. Courtesy Quay Gallery, San Francisco. Photo: Joe Schopplein.

of earthlike . . . real brave stuff. There is something about what he did that was totally transcendent—in terms of how it feels, the way he does it, its eccentricity, its spiritual content (if I may be so profound). I was totally moved. I thought, instead of just making all this stuff out of stoneware, let's go for the most immediate punch—low-fire.

When you say "low-fire," what comes to mind is color: bright, immediate color, something more direct. In 1961, I started to work exclusively in low-fire. Around that time I went to a cabinet and checked out my mother's china paints. She gave me all her materials, and I started fooling around. I started looking at other approaches to ceramics that were accepted by neither the art people nor the ceramics people, not even by the innovators. I started looking at the work of the hobbyists—they had all the "new" techniques.

After I got my technical stuff together, I started a series in which I could control the surface—have a matt surface and a gloss at the same time—with a completely whiteware body. I wanted to make what was going on as direct as possible and still not have the piece look like it had gone through a lot of firing; it had to have the unassuming quality of the Japanese work. I was involved with hot rods when I was a kid, and I knew how to put on thirty coats of lacquer as well as the next guy. Bengston was the first to make airbrushing part of mainstream art, and I was influenced by that as well. I started figuring out a way to spray china paints on, just the right mix, to keep it from running off the piece when it was fired, or to give it a lot of opacity. This was different from traditional china painting. China paints were designed to be used transparently, so the white ground of the body would always comprise part of the color. It took me many years to develop this, and so long to learn. Nobody knew how to do it. Most clay pieces, traditionally, have a one-dimensional surface. I wanted to integrate surface and glaze, make the surface conditional to the piece, and not just a paint job.

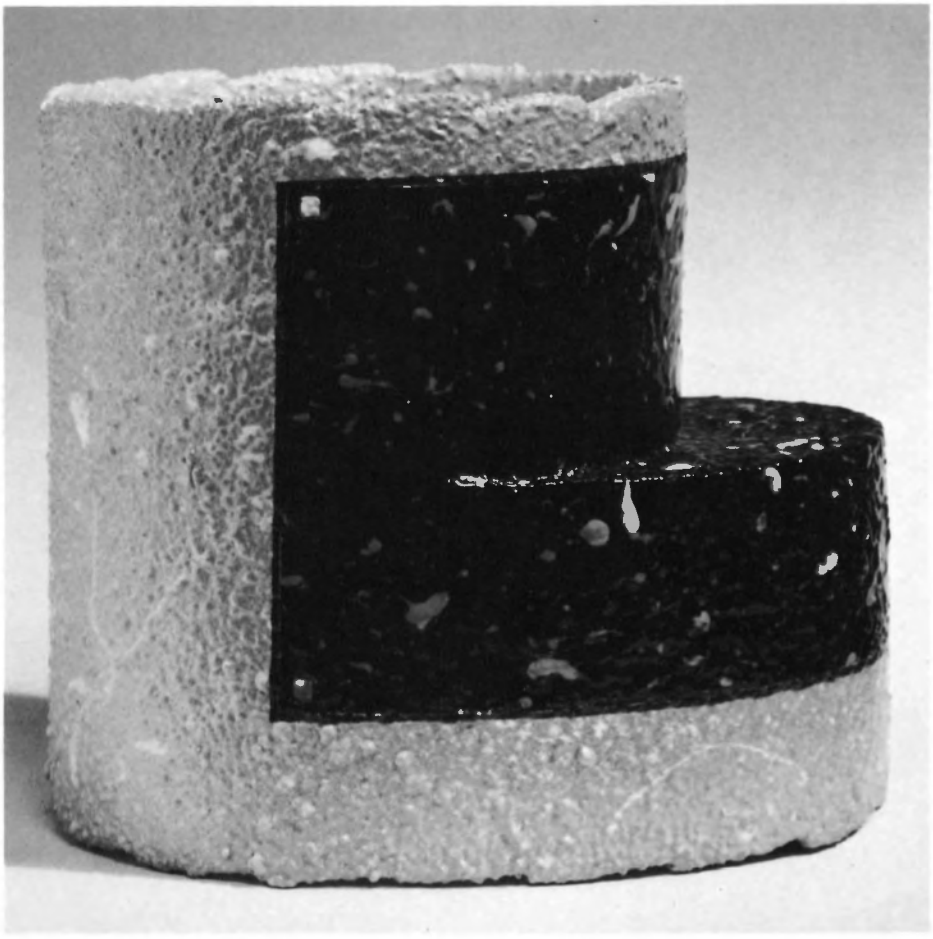
There are colors I associate with what I do, pastel colors that were from my old neighborhood; these riffs and motifs were very much from my childhood, but I use whatever works. I start with color and then start to kill it. I'll take something very bright as a foundation, and start graying color out with complementary colors, or killing one color with a pastel. I want the color to look right and to feel right. It's all intuitive, it isn't a theory; these are technical things I learned over the years, which are becoming more like painting issues. I want it to be as much like painting as possible and still maintain the quality of ceramics.

In a lot of ways, ceramics is like recording music—a lot of steps and processes that are boring. But music is more direct in terms of expression. It's immediate, captured on tape, and you can hear it played back right away. I have never been as moved by art as I have by music.

I've always been running back and forth between music and art; it's hard, but I've got to do both. I love working, and I've started to learn why—I'm working to keep sane. I love what I'm doing in ceramics now, but I do that for reasons that are strictly personal and for my own peace of mind. Sometimes I have a real problem balancing these things, because we're programmed to believe that anyone who deviates from one career image is a dilettante. I'm serious, and I think I've paid my dues; the biggest problem for me is that there's not enough time.

I want to try everything. It's not just ego; it's "Why not?" I'm an idealist, and I continue to fight this battle; if you do things your way on your own terms, it takes a lot longer. But I want it all. I have the artist's fantasy that I'll be freed through big money, through creative achievement. There's a commitment to independence through one's work. It takes you all these years to know, well, what you want. All you want to do is to make a living doing what you like. Let's get paid for it, because that's all you know how to do anyway!

Untitled *(1980), 5½" (14 cm) high, earthenware. Courtesy Charles Cowles Gallery, New York. Photo: eeva-inkeri.*

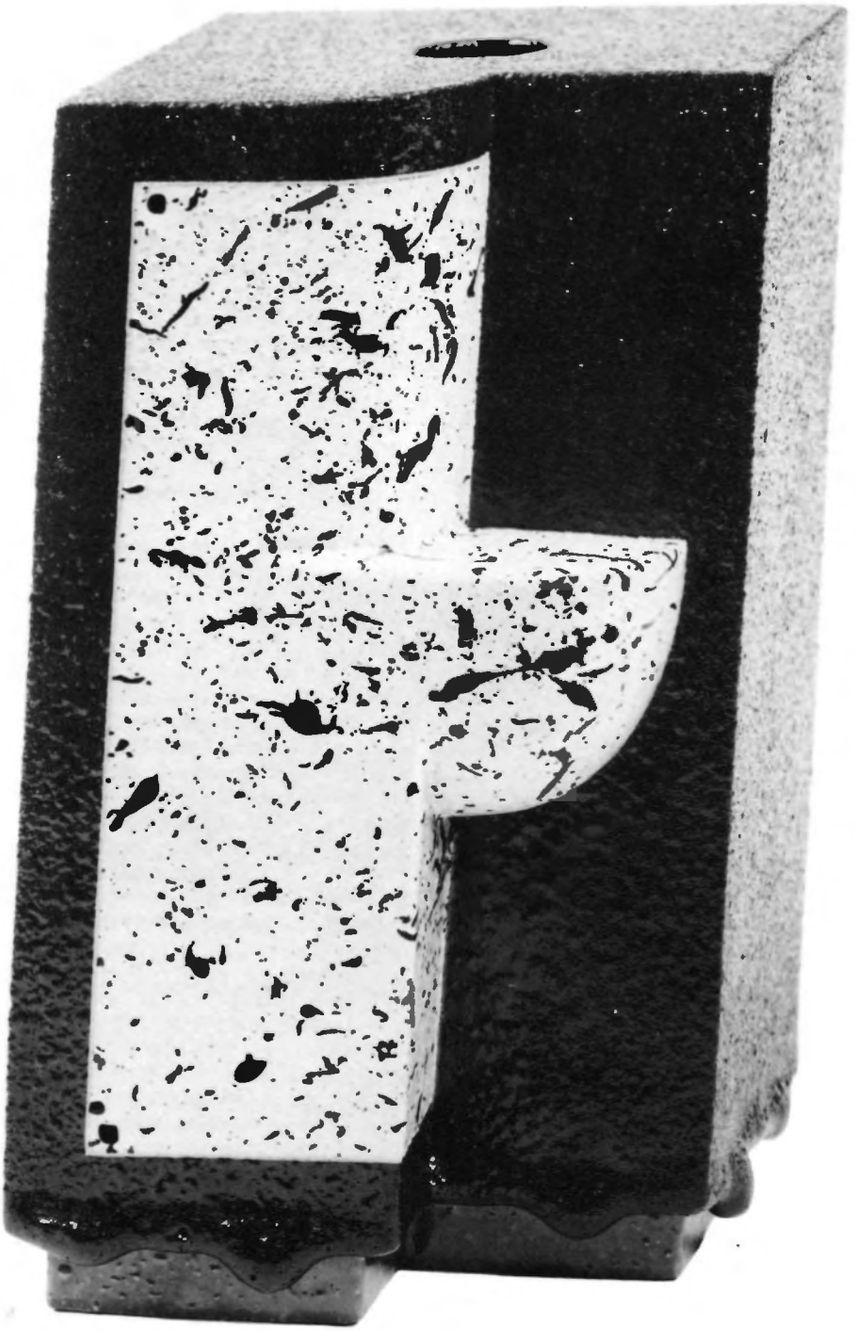


(Left) Untitled Cup *(1981), 2¾" (6.8 cm) high, earthenware. Private collection. Courtesy Quay Gallery, San Francisco. Photo: Roger Gass.*

(Above) Stuccoyama No. 1 *(1978), 4" (10.2 cm) high, earthenware. Private collection. Courtesy Quay Gallery, San Francisco.*

(Above) **Untitled Cup** *(1980), 3½" (8.9 cm) high, earthenware. Courtesy Quay Gallery, San Francisco. Photo: Joe Schopplein.*

(Right) **Untitled** *(1981), 6⅝" (16.8 cm) high, earthenware. Courtesy Charles Cowles Gallery, New York. Photo: eeva-inkeri.*



A New Figure on the Horizon

Michael Lucero, a young sculptor from the Northwest, offers New York some new imagery.

by William Zimmer

On a trip to northern New Mexico as a young child, Michael Lucero fell into a hole of sacred and curative dirt in a noted shrine. He emerged mud-covered. Most likely that incident marked his destiny to work in clay.

Unlike Richard Shaw, Lucero is no deft illusionist, nor does he tell broad and involved jokes like Robert Arneson. Rather, he has become known for tall figures composed of clay shards. The figures are strange and a bit hallucinatory. To me they are redolent of the Southwest; they might be comic peyote visions.

What gives Lucero's figures broad appeal is the universal resonance they emit. I think of heady things like Jungian archetypes, figures emerging from the collective unconscious. Since reading *Faust,* I have been fascinated by the idea of the homunculus, the diminutive man Faust concocted in the lab to do his bidding. For Lucero, too, there must be a fascination with the idea of creating other men—men as tall or taller than life.

The artist of whom Lucero most reminds me is James Surls, the Texas wood sculptor. Surl's supernatural figures seem to sprout from the rough timber as if they were wood spirits. In that same magic fashion, Lucero's men seem to hew closely to the spirit of pottery. Perhaps they are gods of the vessel, as each is capped by a clumsy looking pot head (pun intended?).

There is ample reason for reading all sorts of sophisticated, even deep symbolism into Lucero's work. He began as an artist by fashioning overrough sacrificial lambs hung in slings. Going the whole biblical route, these were often gilded and elaborately detailed. Lucero went on to make an Adam and Eve, and then, inevitably, a Christ. His ceramic technique was the additive one of coiling—the first step in traditional pottery making. Lucero avers that he was making fun of sacredness, both on the thematic level and the craft level. To me there is little overt humor in the biblical characters as depicted by Lucero. I find them rather awesome, in the expressionist style of the German Renaissance. As an iconoclast, Lucero is cunning.

Michael Lucero is from Northern California and he studied ceramics at the University of Washington in Seattle. Given this background, those annual vacations in the Southwest seem to have quite a hold on him. The work of his current phase epitomizes the desert; yet there remains an omnipresent California jauntiness.

When Lucero moved to New York a few years ago, he didn't have his ceramics-making equipment with him, so he resorted to a strategy bearing out his assertion that he is a resourceful artist rather than a purist craftsman. He broke up orange crates and other crating found on the streets and made his men from the splinters, which he electrified with bright crayon lines. The wooden men are flatter than the ceramic examples. One reason Lucero's work can be described as truly chilling is due to the sounds these figures make when shaken: the wooden men produce a clacking sound, the clay ones a more brittle ring.

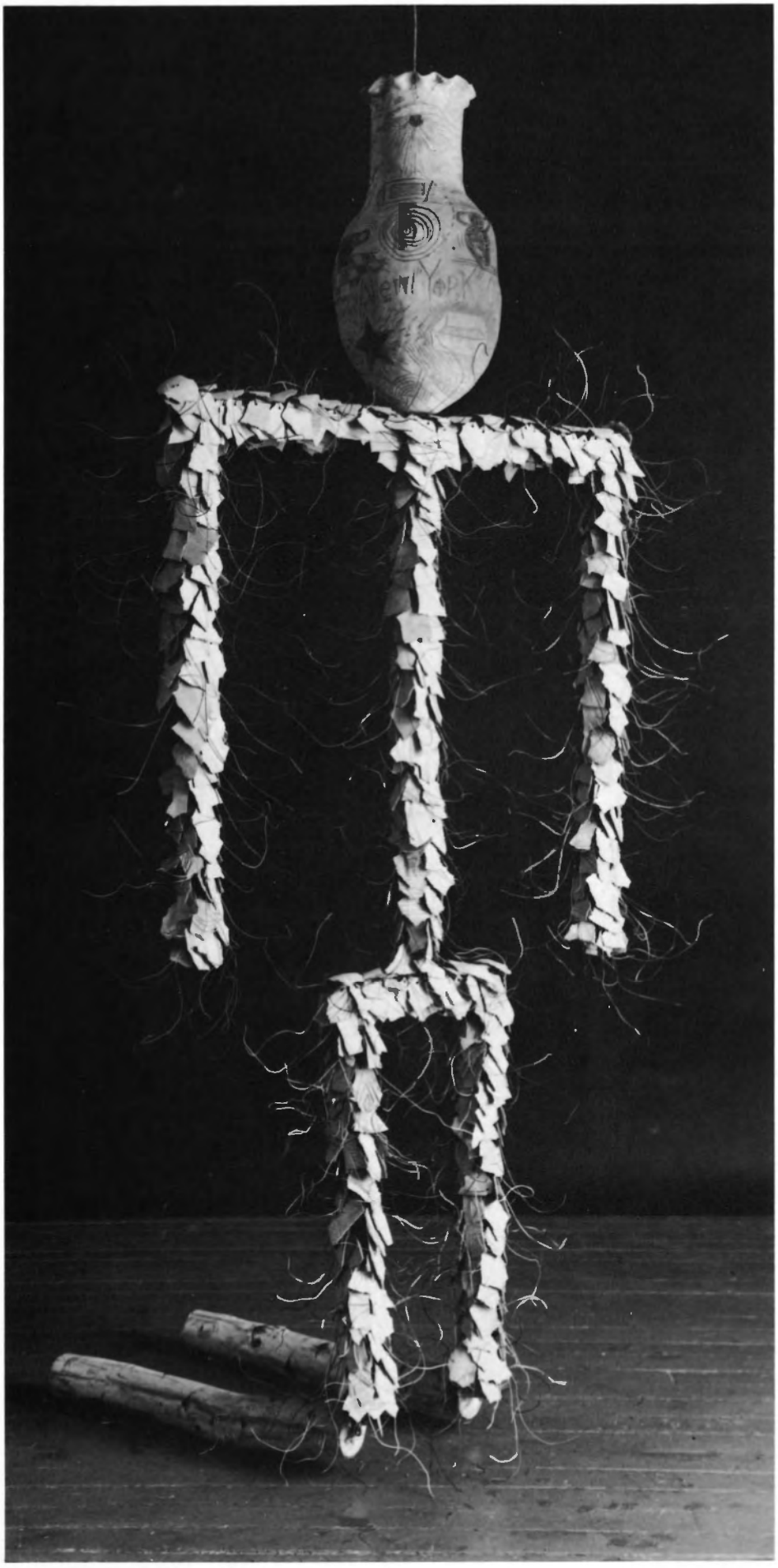
The clay figures are undoubtedly Lucero's triumph. They seem to convey the entire cyclical story of pottery—wholeness leading to brokenness. But Lucero manages to make out of brokenness something integral. His working method is simple, nearly transparent: a few shards are tied together with colored telephone cable and hooked to an elementary armature such as a broom handle. Often arms and legs dangle, but they may also be suspended on stiff armatures, making the figures assume hieratic (what Lucero calls "geometric") poses. These oddly postured figures are the most commanding and mysterious.

In real life, it is the head, the visage, the mien, that identifies or defines a person; so it is with Lucero's crowning vessels. Perched atop each figure is a sloppily made pot (though their sloppiness is often compensated for by baroque detailing) that is a whole version, in color and decoration, of the shards constituting the figure. Lucero says he is intrigued by the notion of the vessel. In ancient and not-so-ancient cultures, it is associated with the sacred: both the vessel and what it contains are magical. Because the body of a Lucero figure is a malleable version of the vessel that rests on top of it, we are presented with the notion of this intrinsic sacred quality having somehow oozed out of the vessel.

One vessel (inverted) I always associate with Michael Lucero is the close-fitting, red baseball cap that is forever on his head. Is it there to keep the lid on some very dark secrets? It gives him a certain kinship with his creations. He has made a self-portrait figure, naturally.

Lucero shares a small, unprepossessing ground-floor loft in Chelsea with the painter Cheryl Laemmle. She paints monkeys and castles, or monkeys in castles. Her paintings, and Lucero's figures hung like suits in the closet, fill up the space. "The people outside wonder what we do," says Lucero. "They think we're nuts." Laemmle joins him and they say in unison, "And we are nuts!"

William Zimmer is an art critic for the SoHo News.



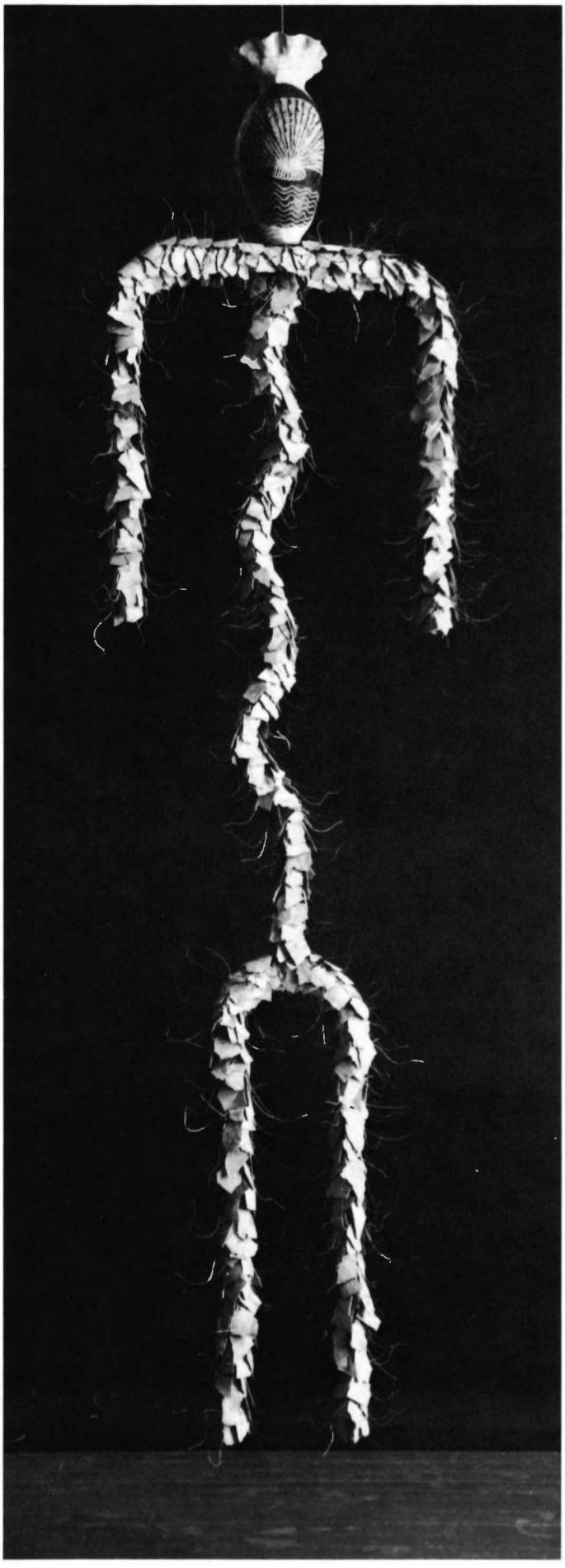
Untitled (NYC) *(1981), 73" (185.4 cm) high, clay, wood, wire. Collection Harold and Gayle Kurtz. Courtesy Charles Cowles Gallery, New York. Photo: Bernard Handzel.*

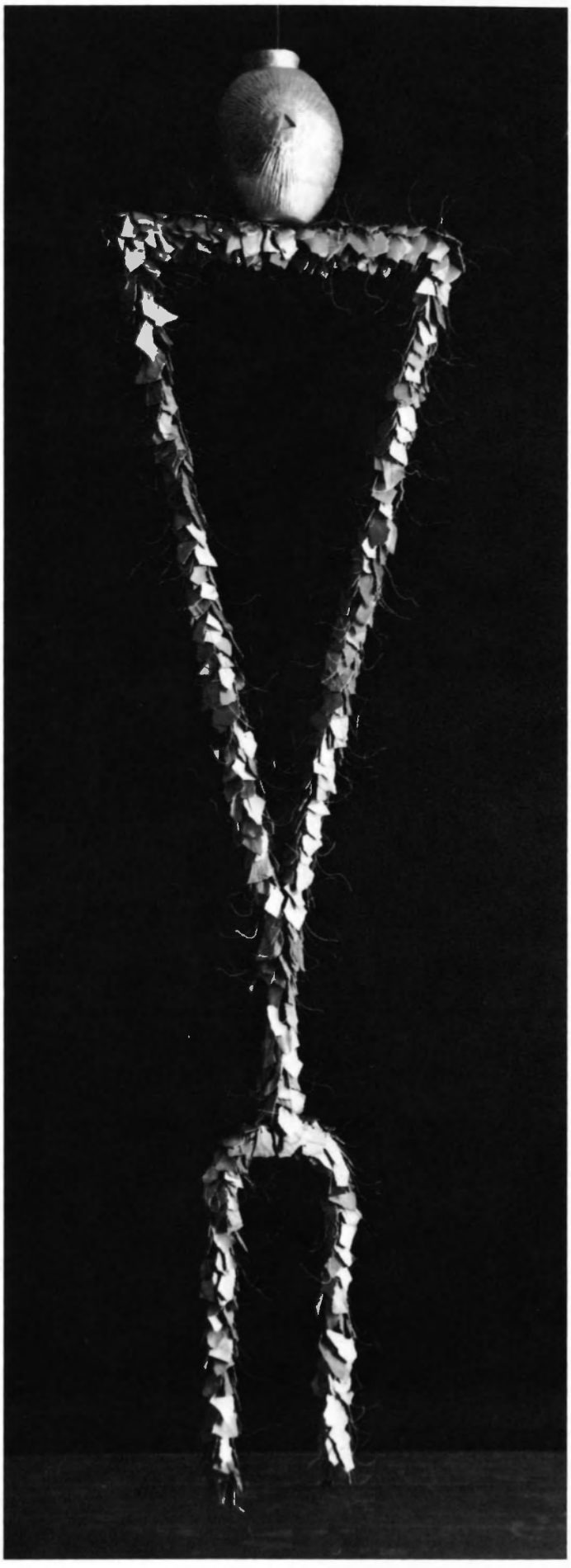
Following Pages:
Untitled (Shell) *(1981), 93" (236.2 cm), clay, wood, wire. Courtesy Charles Cowles Gallery, New York. Photo: Bernard Handzel.*

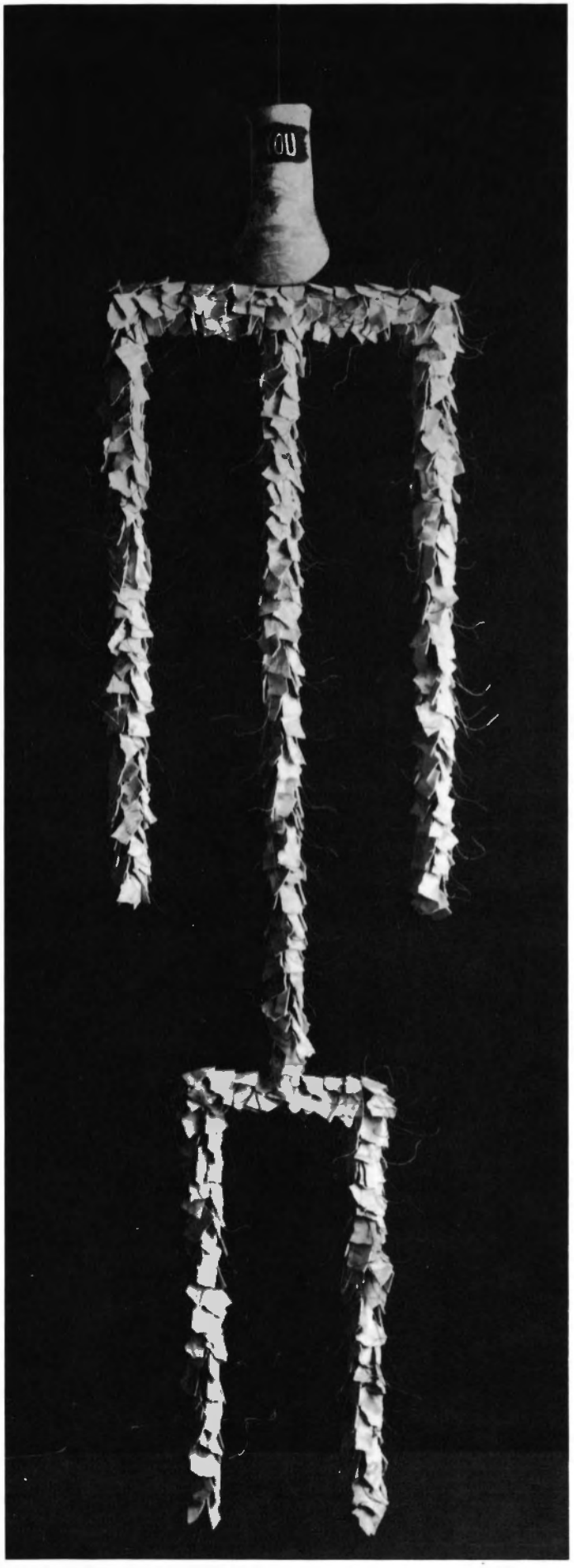
Untitled (Silver) *(1981), 93" (236.2 cm) high, clay, wood, wire, paint. Courtesy Charles Cowles Gallery, New York. Photo: Bernard Handzel.*

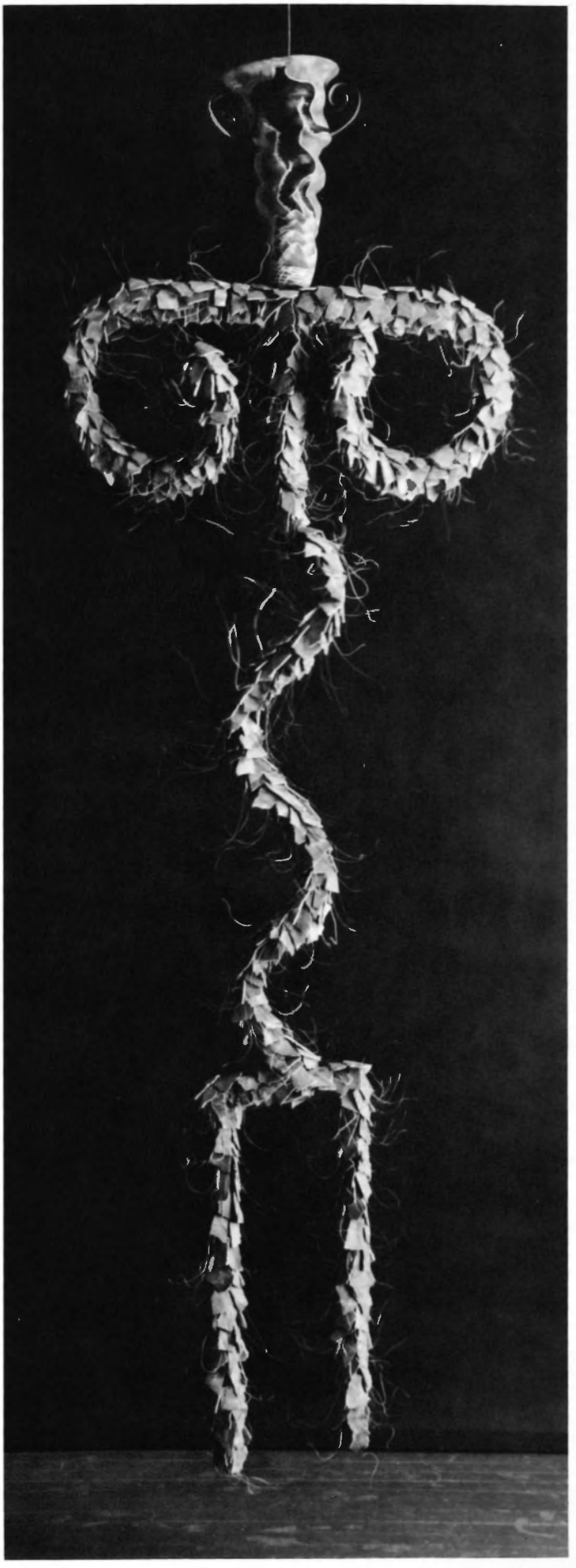
Untitled (You) *(1981), 84" (214.4 cm) high, clay, wood, wire. Courtesy Charles Cowles Gallery, New York. Photo: Bernard Handzel.*

Untitled (Green Figure) *(1981), 98" (248.9 cm) high, clay, wood, wire. Courtesy Charles Cowles Gallery, New York. Photo: Bernard Handzel.*









Ceramic Decoration and the Concept of Ceramics as a Decorative Art

Ceramics is an artistic expression requiring a unity between a clay form and its surface treatment; it cannot be said that one is more important than the other.

by George Woodman

Decoration, unlike most notions in art, is clear and unambiguous. We don't have to misuse it. When we refer to most brush painting, incised marks, or other applied forms on ceramics as "decoration," we are frequently making a mistake. Usually it is not decoration, but something quite different. Furthermore, decoration is bound up with the gentle notion of the decorative, and ceramics has long been tied to the concept of a decorative art.

Decoration is a relational concept. One thing decorates another. One thing serves to adorn, to beautify, or to embellish another. What then is the relationship between marks on pots and decoration as opposed to the relationship between ceramic decoration and ceramics as a decorative art? Most people do not look at paintings and call them decorated canvas's, although some paintings could be considered such. A look at ceramic tradition indicates that most painting and most application of form to pots is not decoration. The pot's relationship to its painting is parallel to the canvas's relationship to painting. Consider the Greek vase. It is a very generalized object, produced in quantities, with no really distinguishing characteristics other than being prepared to be a field for painting. It is by no quirk of history that the name of the artist who did the painting is known to us, while that of the person who fashioned the pot is lost in oblivion. A great deal of modern work in clay is equally tied to painting, and the thinking of many artists is to produce some kind of situation in which clay and painting come together.

Contrast this with what I would call the generalized ceramic vessel. The material rules of ceramics produce an expanded envelope of an elastic material. In the "undecorated" pot, all there is to see is a contour or silhouette; it has no particular identity except at its edges. This at once separates vessel ceramics from sculpture. A sculpture is usually articulated so that we look into it and see more than its silhouette. Ceramics, on the other hand, has an enormously long and significant tradition of painting into that interior surface, so that we have information about the shape of the pot, its character, its form, its degree of vitality, somewhere besides simply at its contour. It is a mistake, however, to call this decoration. This would be to assume that the function of such painting is to embellish or adorn an object that has an identity otherwise. In fact, the clay object is often generalized and unspecific until painted. Europeans, thanks to the gifts of language, don't fall into this trap. In Italy, such a painted design would not be called a decoration, but rather a *motivo* or motif. The relationship of ceramic form to the motif painted on it is not incidental or unimportant. Other materials can also be applied to ceramics to achieve the same ends. The reason we prize the exaggerated effects of fire on certain Japanese glazes is that they perform essentially a painting function. The result is an elaboration of surface and texture that makes it possible to read something inside of the contour. Ceramics is an artistic expression requiring a unity between a clay form and its surface treatment; it cannot be said that one is more important than the other.

Understanding of this connection between pots and the marks applied to them has partly been obscured by the notion that ceramics is somehow connected to sculpture. There are even schools that suggest you study sculpture or have sculptural experience before you take ceramics. This is in my mind erroneous. The natural handmaiden of ceramics is not sculpture, but painting. A sensibility to the organization of surfaces in relation to their contours is not really the province of construction and space, but of the visual organization of fields. It is true that ceramics is a rather dirty occupation involving heavy materials, perspiration, and machinery, which makes it resemble sculpture as an activity. Ceramics, however, has an almost intellectual dimension involving a perceptual finesse we seldom find among sculptors.

This dimension lies in the realm of decoration. A *decorated* pot is usually a very simple pot, not all that interesting, that has been adorned with painting that can truly be called decoration. Perhaps one pot in a thousand is decorated. With a *decorative* pot, on the other hand, what is put onto it has a different function. A decorated pot is embellished; a decorative pot is embellished to decorate something else. To be decorative is to play a role. A decorative pot enters a room under certain rules that allow its admission. It performs a function there. It is something like the guest you might invite to your salon because he or she will play a specific role in the evening's soirée. I didn't always understand these kinds of grown-up notions. When I was a child, one did not put the pickle bottle on the dining-room table. There was a glass container into which the pickles were placed, and it in turn went into a silver filigree object, which was placed upon the table. That is what decoration is all about—something called civilization, which is rapidly disappearing but not to be despised.

The decorative stance represents a forthright and interesting position for artists today. It is extroverted, by way of

contrast, to the complex introversions of "fine art" since Romanticism. In psychological terms, it may be a more mature outlook. In comparison to great decoration, the whole of modern art may seem an unending adolescence. One of the problems of contemporary ceramics has been the attempt to focus into an object the self and all its retinue of associated meanings and strivings. Too many people trying to fit themselves into pots, invoking the image of "ceremonial vessels" or the auto-therapeutics of "centering." Decoration shifts the emphasis away from the maker, focusing outward instead of inward. The participation of the object in an external context of values becomes primary.

Decoration is founded upon the orchestration of the arts. As a word, it derives from the Latin word for decorous. Another word derived from decorous is decorum, which refers to what is proper, suitable, and seemly. I think decorum in the arts is something worth reflecting upon.[1]

Decoration is seldom ambiguous. It speaks a coherent and consistent language shared among many objects. That is one reason why decoration is seldom highly personal. Consider an elaborate room at Versailles: the work of a hundred people may have gone into it, yet their identities have all been submerged into a single decorative effect. Decoration is not self-expressive, and for that reason since the Romantic period it has fallen like a chill on artists wishing to be so. Amy Goldin, who had great insight into the subject,[2] used to say that decoration may be intellectually empty, but it need not be stupid.

It is hard to imagine any decorative tradition without its language, and this is expressed in ceramics as well as the other arts. For instance, in eighteenth-century European porcelain we find reverse curves, shells, perforation, latticework, broken contours, feathery forms, the color white, unclear symmetry relationships, and a rather theatrical character. And of course these characteristics, this lexicon of common language, appear in many guises with many different inflections in architecture, painting, and sculpture as well. It is fascinating how from the hothouse baroque of Bavaria one can arrive at the Arctic chill of English plaster work within the same principles of visual language. There are many decorative traditions. The period I am using to define the decorative tradition is also the period during which the theater developed its notion of many roles, many ways of acting, many types of appearance—a notion of great relevance to the visual arts. Architecture, too, can involve itself with ceramics; architectural façades have utilized unending quantities of stone imitatin ceramic forms, which can sometimes achieve rather imposing scale. In all of this, ceramics plays its own unique role, a role that is fascinating to observe in its contrast to contemporary art. The typical drawing room of the late eighteenth century had a cabinet of ceramics. Not in the kitchen but in the drawing room are plates and teacups correctly and appropriately framed in cabinetry, with decoration that speaks of scale and character, that relates to the wallpaper, drapery, and all the rest.

Modern ceramics follows a crisis in decoration and a crisis in the theory of decoration's role in the fine arts. We all know about the Arts and Crafts Movement and the fulmination of someone like William Morris against a poor little factory-made pitcher that doesn't happen to have fingerprints all over it. The early twentieth century was a period of rejection of ornament on the one hand and rich and lush achievements in decorative art on the other. Perhaps the reductivists held views similar to those of Tolstoy, who said: "Real art, like the wife of an affectionate husband, needs no ornament. But counterfeit art, like a prostitute, must always be decked out." It is not surprising that in the thirties and forties, decoration was rejected absolutely and the dawning consciousness of "good design" took its place. People who were really into aesthetic chic were taking laboratory porcelain and glassware into their kitchens. I remember many years ago, bright young people in their kitchens were so pleased that somehow domestic life and industrial life had been brought together and that they were participating in it.

This brings us somewhere close to the present and to a series of attitudes and responses in ceramics that have dominated recent experience. We need to consider a variety of ceramic objects under several categories, the first of which is what I call the Natural Pot. Many of us have hungered after objects, free of the past, free of style, free of chic, free of sophistication, which somehow, like bread and homemade soup, bring us to a natural and restorative life. It's a longing one can easily understand, and many people working with clay have found a very honorable and meaningful career in producing the Natural Pot. Such a pot aspires to the character of a fresh-baked loaf of bread more than it aspires to any particular kind of ceramic object encountered in recent history. The Natural Pot, when it looks for artistic inspiration, tends to look for the most

Stirrup Jar, *Mycenean (1200–1125 B.C.), 10¼" (26 cm) high. Collection The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Louisa Eldridge McBurney Gift Fund, 1953.*

quiet, understated, and thoughtful examples of ceramics we have known in this century, deriving from that school nurtured and fostered by Bernard Leach. Decoration is often absent and, if present, usually aspires to be decoration only in that sense of painting completing the pot. When its aspirations move toward a more vivid form of decoration, we often find uncertainty, a faltering quality, which mars many of the ceramics from the late forties and early fifties. Yet it is a vital tradition that still offers opportunities.

The second category is the Art Pot, which should not be confused with the Art Pottery movement of the turn of the century. The Art Pot represents a nondecorative stance and takes its inspiration from serious works of art, rather than decorative traditions. The examples most well known to us are those ceramics that grew out of Abstract Expressionism. The ceramics of Peter Voulkos and others insist you take them seriously in the same way you would a painting by de Kooning. It is a movement rich with successes, and at the same time has the almost built-in problem of always trailing a little behind movements in other worlds of art. In recent work by Voulkos, for example, he treats the plate as a format for painting. Now one of the challenges to painting in the twentieth century has been the work of Lucio Fontana, who in the early 1950s decided to slash and perforate the canvas. So, some twenty-five years later we have Voulkos's decision to slice and perforate the plate.

Numerous artists have worked in this vein of painted-but-not-decorated ceramics. Paul Soldner is a very important contributor to this genre. Betty Woodman and myself collaborated on a number of raku pieces in which the ideology is clearly the same. Wayne Higby's landscape pots are certainly not decorated, and they insist we take them seriously as some kind of image. Rick Dillingham's pots ask that we take the same kind of serious attitude toward them, by making reference to archaic, not contemporary art, with the felicitous concept of echoing the character of reconstituted pots of other times and cultures. I find Richard DeVore's and William Daley's work fascinating because to my mind they are the conceptualists of the vessel, raising such issues as: what is an edge, can you take an edge and add it to an edge, can the inside be on the outside, and can the rim exist somewhere other than at the edge? These are the kinds of issues that an essentially conceptual art raises.

The third category I have put under the rather awkward rubric of New Imagism and Old Decoration. Consider an eighteenth-century decorative plate bearing a simulacra of contents painted onto the clay surface. Such a plate is decorative partly by the conceptual transfer of its function into the object itself. A real plate holds leaves or grapes if you wish, but this decorative plate is not a real one, because it is an *image* of a plate performing its function. The decorative function of ceramics is often accompanied by the suppression of actual function, and may be combined with exaggerated manner in appearance. Decorative ceramics are focused outward; they make external references. They are always looking out into the world, not into themselves, and they have an overtness, a literalness, that is often very abrupt and frank. Decorative art gets away with this by the tone, the sense of grace, implied in the object. Today, much decorative art seems outrageous to us, but only because we look at it isolated from the context in which its decorative character is realized.

The types of artists now working out of the decorative tradition are quite varied. There is a tremendous amount of painting on clay, which comes down to what I call illusionism and extended reference. The desire of the object to reach out and connect with many other kinds of things and situations, as we have seen, is characteristic of the decorative. I don't know if Richard Shaw has ever seen them, but in the late eighteenth century the Niderviller factory of France, among others, produced porcelain plates painted to resemble wood, upon which *trompe-l'oeil* still lifes of engravings, playing cards, and other objects were painted. Illusionism has passed through American art and craft like a prairie fire. Illusion is what people of uneducated sensibilities always look for, and some artists deliver it with a degree of satisfaction guaranteed that is quite extraordinary. What separates this kind of illusionism from the illusionism of great ceramic traditions is that the former is not shaped by any frame of reference that gives it focus. Many of these artists realize that the identification of an object as clay places it in a certain perceptual context. I was sufficiently stupid once to wonder why Patti Warashina bothered to make things out of clay, as it seemed so difficult to produce such fragile objects. Finally I realized that the whole point of making these objects in clay is that we see them as belonging to a certain world which they would not belong to if made of wood or plastic or something else. And that is the world of the minor arts, which enjoy certain privileges the major arts do not. Decorative ceramics is a minor art that enjoys an extraordinary permissiveness. You can do anything in clay and get away with it. What I would call the indulgently permissive object has really only existed in clay.

Untitled *by John Gill (1980), 19" (48.3 cm) high. Courtesy Hadler/Rodriguez Gallery, New York.*

In his book *Practical Criticism,* I.A. Richards identifies four kinds of meaning in poetry: sense, feeling, tone, and intention. Tone is one aspect of poetry I think is very important in ceramics. Richards defines tone as an attitude toward the listener, a sense of how the poet stands toward him or her. In the decorative arts tone is critical; success or failure often hinges on the tone in which the artist is speaking to us. The tone of much New Imagism and Old Decoration is extremely varied: it can be humorous, cajoling, dissimulative, didactic, threatening, chic-chic, ironic, mystifying, aloof, or overbearing, just to name a few tones popular since the sixties. This is quite a contrast to the sincere tone in which Bernard Leach asked ceramics to speak, or the serious tone demanded by Voulkos.

What might be called the collaging synthesis—which Robert Rauschenburg and others brought to American art a generation after its invention by the Cubists—has permeated ceramics also. If we are to correctly assess the New Imagism based on Old Decoration, we have to realize the added presence of the collage mentality. Some of the inherent problems of New Imagism were put into focus by the "Soup Tureens" show organized by the Campbell Museum in 1976. The objects were clear as to what they were, but fuzzy as to intention and decorative context. We find in much contemporary ceramics a confusion between the decorated object and the imagism of the decorative object. The decorative tradition is very open and permissive, but only because we know that decoration is neither serious nor expressive. Much work now being done in clay in the decorative tradition, however, attempts to be expressive also. I find it difficult to accept the suggestion of emotional seriousness in clay images that are decorative. The master of tone manipulation is, of course, Robert Arneson. The tone of contempt for the viewer has become essentially the foundation of a career and a mode of expression. It's a game I do not always find easy to play because it seems to be trying to cut both ways. The decorative object is a little bit like the child or the idiot; everything is permitted to it. The work of art, on the other hand, is expected to behave responsibly like a grownup. There are many clay artists who constantly walk a very fine line between the permissiveness of the decorative and the exalted claims of sculpture or painting. Much of this imagery revolves around issues of taste. Bad taste has been a rich source for ceramics. It is necessary to understand what sleight of hand is going on here. Decorative art by definition aspires to good taste, therefore to produce ceramic imagery in bad taste attempts to transform the object into art, because art is not concerned with taste. But to work in a decorative mode and then make the transformation to art through the manipulation of taste is a very complex and perhaps perilous undertaking.

The last category to concern us is the New Decorative Vessel, and we consider it at a moment when attitudes toward decoration in fine arts are rapidly changing. There have recently emerged an articulate group of artists who reject a great deal of recent avant-garde art as elitist, sexist, racist, or capitalistic, and who find the whole possibility of decoration exhilarating and broadening. I tend to be very sympathetic with these artists, and I find much of the art we have seen in the last fifteen years drab and boring. There is an influential and subversive movement in American art today ready to reconsider the whole relationship between decorative art and so-called fine or serious art. The future we hope for ceramics, then, may not consist in bubbling up through the aesthetic soup to the top little bit of scum where the "fine" arts are, but in fact the whole thing may be about to turn over. There are artists all over the country who are interested in and concerned about the decorative stance. For clay artists to jump out of that ship now would be the worst case of timing ever witnessed.

There are artists for whom the decorative spirit has never disappeared. Wayne Higby, with a prescience seldom granted to the young, in the mid-sixties produced a body of work that presented a frankly decorative quality. Andrea Gill is making pots animated by a sense of the decorative tone; her objects do not have the seriousness, the boring pompousness in terms of expressive intent, that we have been treated to in recent times. Betty Woodman's recent pots represent a frankly decorative outlook, playing a kind of sneaky game with function. They are to be used, but used with a sense of decorative ebullience and not some mean notion of the "function" of eating and life at table. John Gill, Amy Smith, Alison Britton, among others, are producing objects that are vessels without function. Yet, they are not expressive images, their tone is clearly and simply decorative. John Glick seems to be joyfully wheeling along a similar road. Among younger sensitive potters, there appears to be a dawning awareness that the decorative stance is one of the strongest and most appropriately taken in ceramics. Attempts to avoid, disguise, or transform the "minor" arts into "real" art result from a misconception of the nature of decoration—a misconception brought about in part by the critical assumptions underlying an increasingly attenuated and artificial framework of cultural values.

1. Editor's note: Writer Donald Barthelme recently stated a similar point of view: "Some art crosses your lap and covers your face with kisses. Some art snarls at you and barks at you. Neither of these things seem to me the way to proceed. I think I like a decent distance between the writing and the reader. There's a kind of decorum governing everything I've written."

2. Most recent discussion of decoration as an issue in art criticism is indebted to the fresh and imaginative views on that subject of the late Amy Goldin. See her article, "Matisse and Decoration: The Late Cutouts," Art in America, *July/August 1975.*

An earlier version of this essay was presented on June 2, 1979, at the First International Ceramics Symposium, held at Syracuse University.

George Woodman, professor of fine arts at the University of Colorado, Boulder, is a painter who has long been interested in ceramics. His own work was recently on view in "Nineteen Artists: Emergent Americans," at the Guggenheim Museum.

Rudolf Staffel: Past and Present

by Sid Sachs

Rudolf Staffel was born in San Antonio, Texas, in 1911. His family had a musical background and initially Staffel thought of following this path. After exposure to a number of instruments, however, he decided to become a painter. Staffel studied with various local artists, and in 1931 entered the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His paintings were both figurative and narrative; he had great interest in folk and primitive art, as well as the depiction of light. "When I was a painter, I was always interested in light. Something about light coming through glass, wax, or snow. I wanted to achieve a passage of light."[1] Note that Staffel speaks here of light as a physical entity, passing *through* mediums (transparent, translucent, or opaque to light in varying degrees), which is considerably different than the traditional, illusionary use of light in painting. The painting vehicles Staffel used reflected this interest; he worked primarily in watercolor or encaustic mediums that can be worked to allow light to pass through them. With hindsight, this fact seems significantly linked to Staffel's adaptation of porcelain.

His teachers in Chicago, Louis Ripman and Laura van Papelladam, were encouraging, but Staffel felt stifled by the strict departmentalization of the school. He spent most of his time at the Art Institute Museum and the Field Museum of Natural History. A traveling show of German glass greatly impressed him; he returned to San Antonio to try to borrow money from an art patron so he might study glassblowing in Germany. The Depression rendered these plans unfeasible, though his family got him enough money to travel to nearby Mexico to learn the craft. In Mexico City, his plans to apprentice in a glass factory ended in frustration so he turned to ceramics instead, after viewing indigenous archaeological specimens in the National Museum. After three months of study at the Escuela Para Maestros, San Juan Teotihuacan, he returned to the United States and set up a kiln in his parents' backyard. His painting abilities got him a job painting a WPA mural under Dorothy Stewart in Albuquerque, New Mexico. In 1936, Staffel took a job teaching and producing ceramics for the Arts and Crafts Club of New Orleans. He studied a few days a week with Paul Cox, mass-producing canning pots for strawberry jam. Three years later, teaching a summer session at the Silvermine Guild of Artists in Connecticut, he caught the attention of people from Philadelphia's Tyler School of Art. Tyler dean Boris Blai recruited Staffel, who taught there from 1940 until his retirement as Professor Emeritus in 1978.

Staffel says one of Tyler's attractions was that its educational policies were based on John Dewey's principles. (Dewey's theories were also very influential in the teaching at another Philadelphia institution, the Barnes Foundation.) Tyler believed in exposing students to a number of disciplines before they specialized. This open environment with experiential emphasis, allowing the student to proceed at his or her own speed ("concentration would come eventually in your career, in or out of school"), may have affected Staffel's outlook. Even today he seems to work by a process of self-discovery and experimentation with several mediums, rather than from a set of *a priori* assumptions about the nature of design or clay.

Staffel's ceramics from this period (1937–1940) seem to be concerned with two divergent aims: the forming of the pot, and its glazing. Most often the decoration incorporates figurative elements, and these early images are interchangeable with his paintings. At this stage in his career, Staffel still toyed with the idea that he was a painter who also made ceramics. Images of carriages, cars, clowns, and chimney sweeps occur in these works, but the drawing often interacts unsurely with the edge and mass of the works. They seem to reflect Staffel's uncertain choice between painting and ceramics, and might have been more successfully realized on canvas. Formally, the figures have some of the elongated whimsy of Jacob Lawrence or Sam Haile, though the space depicted is less flat and the content is neither Social Realism nor experimental glazing, but rather a form of genre painting. These pots are about New Orleans folklore and local color—specific responses to regional images that Staffel seems committed to make universal. Even in these early works, one sees Staffel's predilection for cool color; it is not inconceivable that subconsciously Staffel had been influenced by the blue green coloration of Newcomb Pottery during his stay in New Orleans.[2] Staffel, however, says this is not due to any preconceived spectral preferences, but rather for the painterly feel and stability of the salts he uses ("cobalt works like a dream"), which just happen to fire into blues, greens, and aubergine.

By the fifties these difficulties are resolved, and Staffel is producing stoneware vessels whose abstract decorations joyously dance around the surface. These curvilinear gestures in the pottery's glazing can be considered allied to the automatic writings of the Abstract Expressionists. Staffel's small-scale, restrained *oeuvre* may at first seem unlikely to be aligned with the New York School, but Staffel, perhaps even more than those West Coast potters included in John Coplan's 1966 assemblage of *Abstract Expressionist Ceramics,* has the credentials for such characterization. First, Staffel's age places him within that generation chronologically. Second, although Staffel's serene ceramics would seem to divorce themselves from the frenetic brushstrokes of the action painters, they easily corresponded to the calmer canvases of Bradley Walker Tomlin, Philip Guston (in his Abstract Impressionist period), or Mark Rothko. This is not to say that Staffel's ceramics are derivative, or to place ceramics beneath painting. On the contrary, Staffel's vessels seem equal to these paintings, with analogous or shared concepts generating images. For example, the gestural glazing has antecedents both in Surrealism as well as traditional pottery; the gestures of the New York School also derive from Surrealism, as well as Oriental brushwork. Staffel tells of copying Chinese calligraphy from a book at age sixteen; when queried about sources, he mentions Zen, tarot cards, Jungian trans-cultural imagery, and his love of primitive art. Similar reactions have been recorded for the New York painters. The process of the work is not camouflaged in either group of artists (clay remains clay, glaze is glaze, paint affirms itself as paint). Staffel also speaks of the subjective interaction of a specific person with a certain medium:

I've always had an abiding interest in the way materials interact with my own energy. . . . In other words, a soft stringy clay is naturally going to make you do some types of work that will probably be softer than if you have a stiff clay. . . .Here's a material and here's a person and they each are going to strongly influence what happens. . . . The artist is in full control and the material is in full control and there should be a balance or a harmony.

Jackson Pollock's famous quotation reveals much of the same spirit of experimental equilibrium between creator and matter:

I continue to get further away from the usual painter's tools. . . .I prefer sticks, trowels, knives, and dripping fluid paint or a heavy impasto with sand, broken glass, and other foreign matter added. . . . The painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well.[3]

Finally, Staffel studied with Hans Hofmann in the mid-

forties after he got out of the army, and was commuting from New York to Tyler. Hofmann's influence on a generation of artists has been well documented, and Staffel still speaks warmly of the affirmative quality of Hofmann's teaching. Staffel was drawing from life in Hofmann's class (an activity that continues to this day), but it would be naïve to assume that some of Hofmann's more avant-garde notions did not affect the younger man.

In the mid-fifties, a patron fortuitously commissioned Staffel to produce a porcelain dinner service. Staffel felt that porcelain was outside the "craft" arena, but began the project anyway. It was one of those chance occurrences that change the course of art; for porcelain is the medium Staffel has produced his mature work in and for which he will be remembered. With the exception of two short occasions, Staffel has worked almost exclusively with porcelain since this time.[4] At first Staffel continued to darkly stain the porcelain with washes of colored salts. Recognizing porcelain's potential for translucency, his ceramics slowly evolved into works whose forms contribute to that ability.

That is, Staffel's preferred formats are open, pure white bowls or cylindrical pots, which allow light to enter from above and travel through the thinner walls of the vessels. This adherence to "form follows function" obviously discourages Staffel from producing closed or bottle forms.[5]

These translucent vessels Staffel has come to call *Light Gatherers,* although this term only approximates their effect. These pots take in ambient light from above, not to enclose or capture it, but rather to emit it with a pale, mysterious quality. Differences in clay thicknesses account for variation in light transmittance; these result from layering in the handbuilt pots and/or finger or implement markings on the wheel-thrown vessels. The *Light Gatherers* can be interpreted as ceramic equivalents of Hofmann's push-pull theory of painting. For Hofmann, modern painting was best served by a tension between the deep space of illusionistic washes and the flat space of painterly surface manipulations close to the picture plane. In Staffel's *Light Gatherers,* an analogous situation occurs: the translucency of the thin porcelain functions like deep space, to be countered by Staffel's surface manipulations that bring the eye back to the two-dimensional reality of the clay. These "painterly" concerns are adroitly balanced by Staffel's sculptural abilities; the volumes of his vessels are graceful, expansive, seeming to float upward naturally through the air.

The *Light Gatherers* are more baroque than the above description would imply, alluding to a whole realm of biomorphic interpretation. A 1966 lidded porcelain bowl, for example, shows a remarkably comic anthropomorphic knob atop a rather austere thrown vessel. Most figural references in more recent works have been abstracted, so that there is a play between representation and process. The small pots that take on facial characteristics (due to the bilateral placement of "eyes" alongside a vertical "nose" ridge) are actually created as Staffel tests the malleability and light-transmitting properties of various clay bodies. Many of his wheel-thrown *Light Gatherers* retain rings of the throwing process, which remind one of the ribs of an embryonic chordate; when lit they have the eerie quality of Lennart Nilsson's fetal photographs. The biologically based abstract works of Gary Stephan and Michael Tetherow also come to mind.

There is more than this to the pieces, however. They are clearly ceramic works that contribute to and deny clay history. Staffel abstractly jots numerical notations on some of his small pots; these marks are also remnants of testing procedures. He embeds pieces of almost pure feldspar and fires them into vitreous inclusions reminiscent of Peter Voulkos, though predating him by years. The rim of one bowl has been pulled off like taffy; in its frozen white stillness it resembles one of Dr. Harold Edgertown's stroboscopic photographs of droplets splashing into a saucer of milk. At the same time, it reminds one of George Ohr, and yet remains distinctly a Staffel. The fact that Staffel has chosen the vessel tradition, yet expanded its parameters, reveals the quiet, unassuming nature of classicism and iconoclasm evident in his work. These many sides of the work—representation, historic innovation, cultural continuity, and abstract numinous qualities—combine to make Staffel a master of his craft. Rudolf Staffel's vessels speak their own language eloquently, factually, fully.

1. All quotations are from "The Light of Rudolf Staffel," an interview with the artist conducted by Paula and Robert Winokur, Craft Horizons *37, no. 2 (April 1977), or from conversations with the author.*
2. Both Kenneth Smith and Paul Cox, associates and mentors of Staffel during his early years in New Orleans, had been affiliated with the pottery at Sophie Newcomb College.
3. Jackson Pollock, "My Painting," possibilities *(Winter 1947–48), p. 78 ff.*
4. These periods are 1967–68, while Staffel was teaching at Tyler School of Art in Rome, where he produced a group of bronze chalices, and in 1980, when Staffel produced several stoneware vessels with gold luster accents while working as artist-in-residence at Tyler after his retirement. Such auxiliary works are quite interesting in that their opacity reveals Staffel's considerable sculptural talents, which are sometimes overlooked in discussing his translucent clay bodies.
5. Outside the realm of ceramics, but very conceivably related to these open, dematerialized, and center-lighted objects are the New Wave sculptures of Steve Keister. Keister received both his undergraduate and graduate degrees from Tyler School of Art and would obviously know Staffel's works.

This article was prompted by a small retrospective exhibition of Rudolf Staffel's work held at Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia (June 10–July 17, 1981).

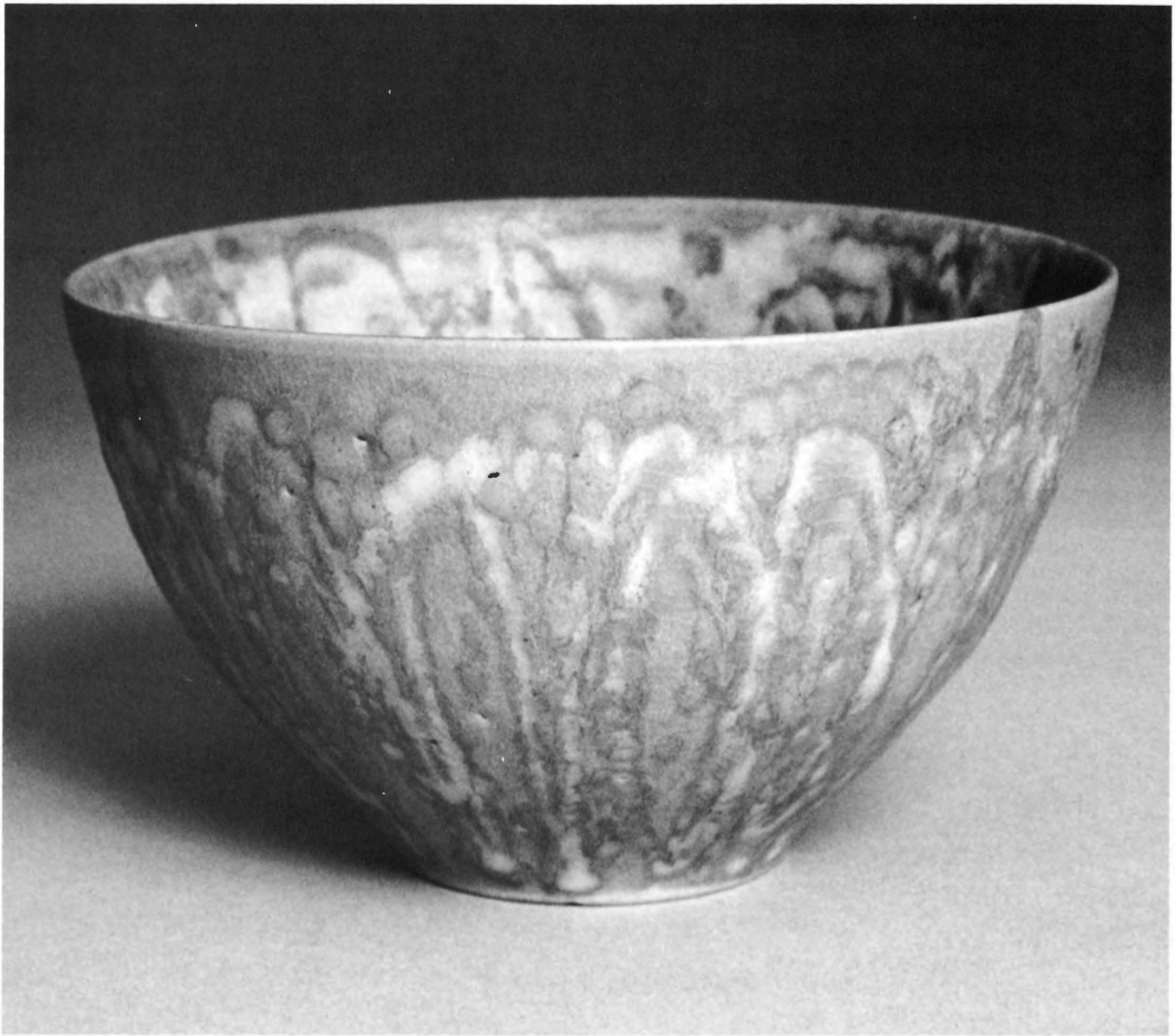
Sid Sachs is an artist and critic whose work was most recently on view in "Dark Thoughts: Black Paintings," at Pratt Manhattan Center Gallery, New York.

Previous Page:
Light Gatherer *(1981), 5½" (13.9 cm) high, porcelain. Courtesy Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia. Photo: Matthew Drutt.*

Counterclockwise from Top:
Bowl *(ca. 1952), 7" (17.9 cm) high. Courtesy Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia. Photo: Matthew Drutt.*

Bowl *(ca. 1954), 7¼" (18.4 cm) high. Courtesy Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia. Photo: Matthew Drutt.*

Bowl *(ca. 1960), 7½" (19.1 cm) high. Courtesy Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia. Photo: Matthew Drutt.*



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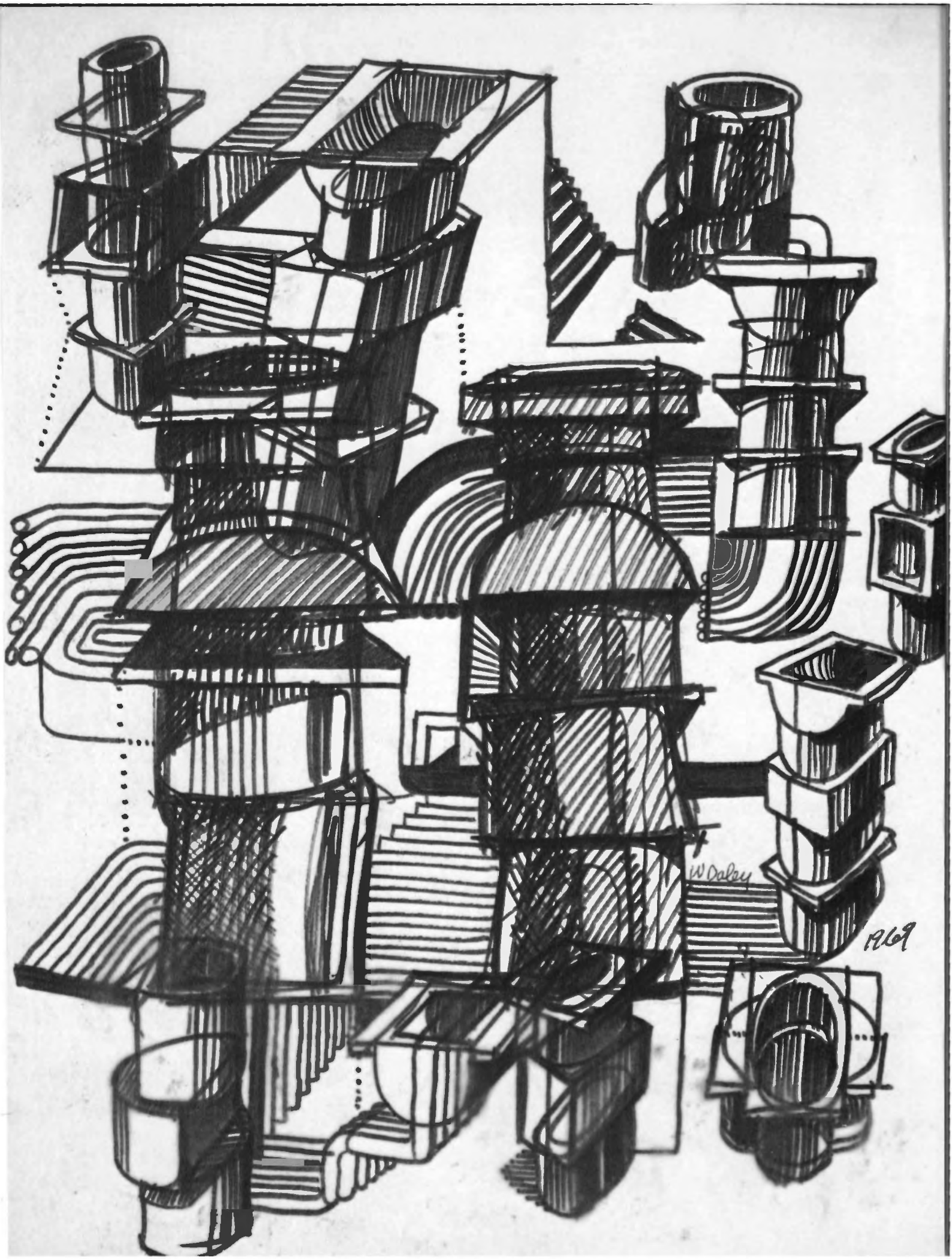
W Daley
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On Drawing

by William Daley

I begin making a pot by drawing past successes. It is a way to ease past the fear that there may not be "anything in there." Recapitulation suggests alternatives, and the variations multiply for review, thereby extending the lineage of remembered evolution by noting the form of singular exceptions. When possibilities emerge that seem to merit further development, I shift from typing paper to drawing directly on my prepared studio walls. There I draw elevation and plan views at full size. This shift in scale helps me to adjust the proportions of forms to imagined volumes. When completed, they become working drawings for templates and support forms necessary for me to work in clay.

Drawing as a way of examining options and recording findings for future use is a standard design practice. It is related to written language, as a loose visual symbol system. By differentiating possibilities and describing their form, drawing is a way of using images to nurture thought.

This cursory account of my working method and the above definition of drawing's purpose do not account for the feelings I have about drawing and making pots as reciprocal aspects of my work. For me, drawing is notational, schematic rather than pictorial, and I use a number of conventions: plan, elevation and sections; axanometric and orthographic projections, which are combined with perspective as parts and fragments or complete views. I use these conventions, which use lines, to note information. Line itself is a convention of visual perception; one that assumes the presence of light. Line is one of our learned visual cues to perceive form. As such, it is the primary descriptor of mass, space, and volume. To me, the way line can be manipulated as pot encompasses compelling reasons for making drawings. First of all, line is the elementary boundary; it supports our sense of inclusion and habitation. Second, it is the means by which we sense the illusion of edge in space (silhouette); it qualifies our sense of inside-outside, which can describe the location of the alien and the intimate. Third, as cross section (the slice), line describes the boundaries of volumes and the axis of their symmetries. Fourth, through the connection of points, line suggests movement; as such it is the main cue to our perception of closure. Closure in turn is the implication of continuance and completion. For me, drawing and making are ways to use these elemental properties of line to articulate form.

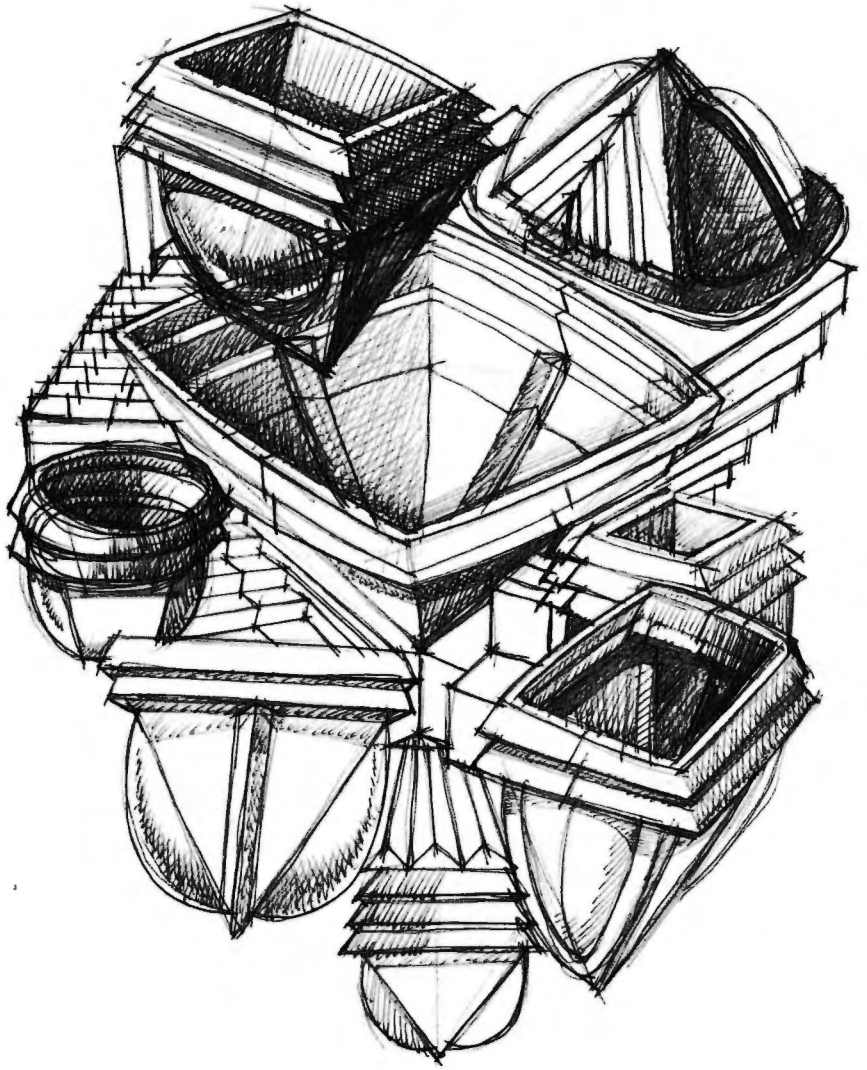
Drawn lines allow gravity free investigation to escape from the tyranny of making clay "stand up by itself." In a way, drawing is a way to make a model without the constraints of a physical object's ultimate requirements. For example, the bivalent nature of the drawn line permits transparency—inside-outside can be viewed simultaneously through the object's walls. The relativity of location can be manipulated at will. Near and far, part and whole, can coexist; boundaries and their numbers can be illusions, and more than one thing can exist in the same space at the same time. The axis of volumes and the auras[1] of shapes, which are normally invisible, can be seen. Drawing permits me to play with the inverse; the dual of a pot. It encourages the logic of caprice.

To draw confounding possibilities is an important way to make things clear. Drawing is a kind of indirection that lets the ugly and the awkward temper habitual convictions. Sometimes drawing confirms recognitions of structure that allude to the way things were always arranged.[2] Such fortuitous insights are part of drawing as a kind of reverie—the awareness of a sense of correspondence not thought for, a way to be at once productively connected and disengaged. It is a state I seek to attain by drawing during faculty meetings.

In primary school, I drew as a way to avoid learning. I made the same drawing over and over. Usually they were "aerial combats"of Fokkers and Spads. These flights of near microscopic biplanes offered the pleasure of making millions of finely dotted lines—lines as trajectories that connected all protagonists and completed all possibilities. As I did them, amazing spaces emerged that filled up everything. On vacations and holidays, I now draw farm houses, flowers, and birds. The rest of the time, I draw the lines of pots on typing paper with a ball-point pen. In many ways, I am still making the same drawings I made in 1930 at St. Matthew's School.

Drawing on typing paper is tentative and exploratory. Drawing on the studio walls is reductive and concrete. I use a level to draw right angles and account for gravity. The lines are measured to allow for the shrinkage of clay. Full-scale adjustments in configuration and proportion are made with latex wall paint to paint out what doesn't work. Broad carpenter's pencils are used to redraw my best-guess judgment of what will work later as a physical volume. I say "guess" because the final decisions are made while working in clay.

The physical presence of a pot speaks through a more primal sense—touch—which precludes light and visual line. Touch confirms form as material: its texture, its temperature, and

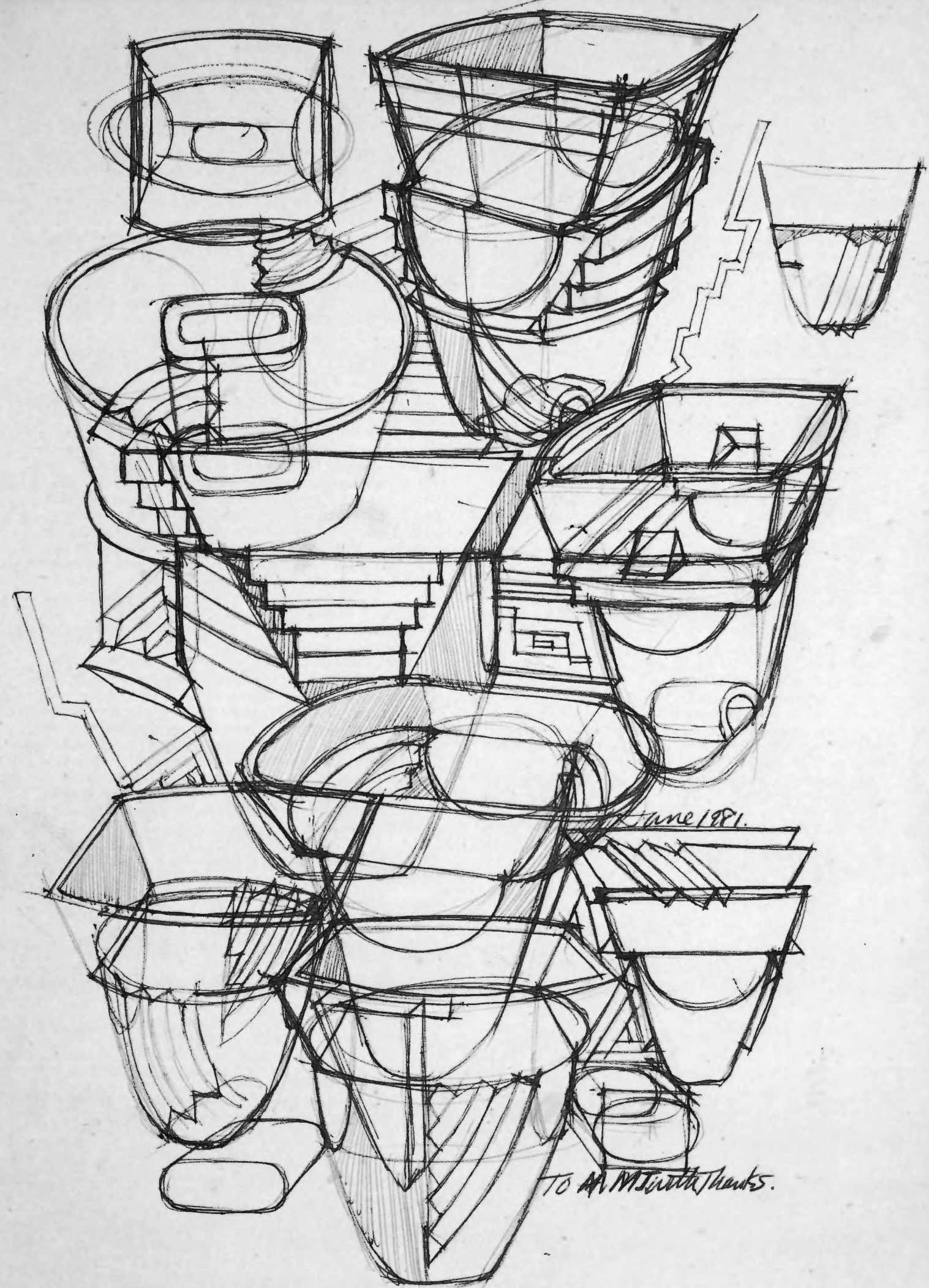


its hardness or softness of surface and edge. There *is* a tactile sense in drawing—lines have the capacity to emphatically describe hardness and softness—but for me, my drawing is neutral to touch. The burnished and brushed passages of my pots are another matter, however. The pots are a rather sober but powerful expression of clay's ability to hold touch inflections. Compressed or open surfaces of burnishing or brushing invite satisfactions on a preconscious level. I see such marks on the clay as another aspect of drawing.

I use drawing to think about how geometries can imply movement and allude to change. Line as shape is often the silhouette of form against the light. Light's movement on form describes lines of direction. Sometimes the direction implies motion as a part of a radial symmetry, directing line around an axis. At other times, line is part of a bilateral symmetry that is frontal, and the pattern of structure implies motion back and forth across the axis. When I draw, I sometimes try to imagine a viewer that moves as light does. In a pot, I try to control the duration of passage from part to part and view to view. I am fascinated by our very limited capacity to hold changing form in our mind. This is particularly true when symmetries become irregular. My pots please me most when they appear to be clear and simple at first view, but become confounding through considered looking. Developing this sense in a drawing is engaging, but not nearly as compelling as making it happen in three dimensions. Perhaps this is because a pot is such a specific finite thing. The idea of a pot as a bowl or a plate is intimate and familiar. They are like lines—everyone understands them. Making drawings and pots affords me the chance to attempt to re-know the familiar and to make "amazing spaces that fill up everything."

1. Objects occupy space around them—command, suggest, or insinuate an extension of occupancy. This is their aura. Giacometti was a master at challenging the dimension of what is physical and what is aura.
2. My own way is Platonic, and is more closely related to the brain's right hemisphere, where our perception of form and structure is below our logical sense of "rightness." This idea of rightness is also Catholic: the Kingdom of God, ordered, perfect, unchanging.

William Daley makes his pots with his wife Catherine, teaches ceramics at Philadelphia College of Art, and is represented by Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia.


June 1981.
TO Al M Smith Thanks.

Maija Grotell

by Elaine Levin

She built one of the nation's finest ceramics departments and helped break ground for the revolution in clay that followed her.

In 1938, when many artists were either working for the Works Progress Administration or on relief seeking any work they could find, Maija Grotell held two jobs in her field and had just been offered the chairmanship of the ceramics department at Cranbrook Academy of Art. By the standards of the period, she was in an enviable position. Yet she hesitated. For nine years (beginning shortly after her arrival from Finland in 1927), Grotell had been teaching at the Henry Street Crafts School in New York City. She was accustomed to the city's rhythm, was able to meet other Finnish immigrants as they arrived in the U.S., and enjoyed the city's public steam baths, a custom familiar from home. The crafts school, an adjunct of the Henry Street Settlement House, was a mecca for social workers, college students, government officials, and European visitors. Shy and conscious of her heavy accent, Grotell enjoyed listening, rather than contributing, to the animated meal-time discussions among the school's diverse visitors and teachers.[1]

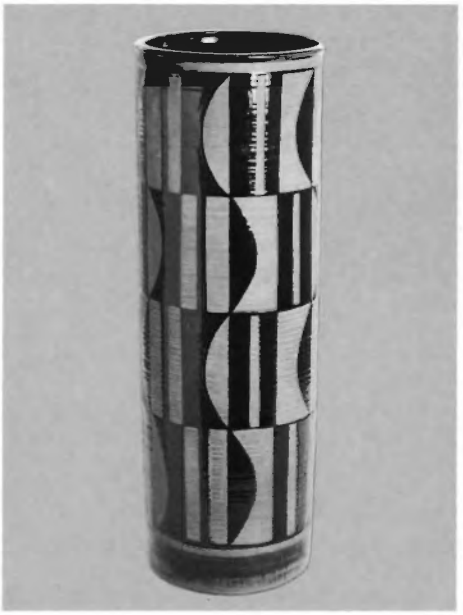
In addition to teaching at Henry Street, for two years Grotell had been a ceramics instructor and research assistant at Rutgers University. Dealing with college students and production-ware problems was familiar territory, since Grotell had worked in the ceramics industry in Finland. At Rutgers, she took advantage of the laboratory facilities to expand her research on decorative surface enrichment. Since 1929, her ware had received citations and honorable mentions in various exhibits, finally earning her a second prize in the 1936 Ceramic National Exhibition at the Syracuse Museum of Art, New York (later renamed the Everson Museum of Art). The following year she received a silver medal from the Exposition Universelle in Paris, and in 1938 the Arts and Crafts Society of Boston brought her work to national attention, honoring her with the title of Master Craftsman.

But in 1938, the crafts, like Grotell, were at a crossroads. The Depression had stimulated diverse schemes aimed at supporting artists, one of which was destined to taint public attitudes toward the place of ceramics within the art spectrum. This avenue was initiated by two women who saw an opportunity to help small, rural populations retain their self-sufficiency and their self-esteem. Around 1930, Mrs. Randolph Coolidge started the Sandwich Home Industries in New Hampshire to encourage well-made handicrafts for the state's tourist trade. Later, this project was upgraded to become the state-supported League of New Hampshire Arts and Crafts, inspiring other states to found similar groups.[2] Mrs. Aileen Osborn Webb had the same aspirations for the people of Putnam County, New York, where she organized several craft groups. This venture resulted in the founding of America House in New York City, where these crafts were sold, and in a new organization, the American Crafts Council.[3] Both projects, timely and worthy in their own right, inadvertently relegated ceramics of that period to the realm of hobby handicrafts.

Working against that image was a program by the Welfare Arts section of the Works Progress Administration, which supported professional sculptors (many of whom turned to clay as a less expensive material both for themselves and for their patrons). Holding a middle ground were special projects such as one in Cleveland, where ceramists produced small-scale sculptures for public places, underwritten by the WPA. During this same period two museums, in Cleveland and Syracuse, did much to keep ceramics in a good light by regularly providing a museum setting for contemporary work in clay.

Meanwhile, another environment for ceramics was taking shape. In 1928, a newspaper publisher named George G. Booth, who traced his ancestry to English metalsmiths, had engaged Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen to design and build a school for the arts on Booth's estate. Saarinen's concept of such an establishment combined the traditional craft system of Finland with aspects of William Morris's Arts and Crafts Movement and Walter Gropius's Bauhaus.[4] Basic to Saarinen's scheme was that the crafts were on an equal level with the fine arts. The Bauhaus, in fact, had called for the alignment of all the arts with industry to meet the needs of a complex, industrial society. Booth and Saarinen had these goals in mind for the Cranbrook Academy of Art.[5]

In contrast to the constant activity at Henry Street and the large campus at Rutgers, the Cranbrook Academy of Art was a small school, twenty miles from Detroit, isolated amid the rolling hills of the Michigan countryside. In this ambience, Saarinen (appointed president in 1932) offered Grotell a ceramics department under her complete control, with her own laboratory where she could pursue her own goals in ceramics. It was an offer she finally couldn't refuse. For at Rutgers the emphasis was on ceramic engineering, while at Henry Street, although she had built a ceramic workshop with an excellent reputation, she must have understood that her work would be seen in a handicraft context if she remained.



Maija Grotell at Cranbrook *(ca. 1941). Courtesy American Craft Council, New York. Photo: Charles Eames.*

Plate *(ca. 1957), stoneware. Whereabouts unknown.*

Leopard Skin Vase *(ca. 1949), stoneware. Collection Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York.*

Vase *(1940-42), 21½" (54.6 cm) high, albany slip over unglazed clay. Collection Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.*

The nucleus of Saarinen's group at Cranbrook was Scandinavian: Saarinen himself, his wife Loja, who designed textiles, their children (including architect Eero Saarinen), and Swedish sculptor Carl Milles. There were other European and American craftspeople, but no ceramics department. A New York gallery exhibit of Grotell's pottery led Saarinen to invite her to join the faculty. What may have attracted the architect's attention, besides her obvious competence in handling the material, could have been Grotell's geometric designs, integrated on curved surfaces—an interpetation of Art Deco motifs that would complement the Saarinens' designs for furniture and textiles.

Grotell's background gave her a sound basis to meet the challenge of Cranbrook. Unsure at first of the differences between pottery in Finland and America, she had taken a summer-school class with Charles Binns at the New York State College of Clayworking and Ceramics at Alfred University in 1927. Most of Dr. Binns's techniques were familiar to her, but his aesthetic concerns remained within an Oriental ceramic tradition. Grotell, on the other hand, was attuned to contemporary ideas, decorating her vessel surfaces with interpretations of the New York skyline, for example, or linear and geometric combinations. One of her first projects with Saarinen at Cranbrook was to develop a brick with a richly colored surface to be used in his design for the General Motors Technical Center. The result was acclaimed as quite innovative at the time and encouraged other architects to incorporate ceramic in their plans.

Although she worked on other commissions, mainly for the Cranbrook Foundation, Grotell's primary concern in her early years at the academy was to build up her department, which only possessed three wheels and one kiln upon her arrival. Within ten years, she had twenty wheels, four gas kilns and one electric kiln, and a department filled to capacity with graduate and undergraduate students. Unlike most academic instructors, the Cranbrook faculty under Saarinen believed "art cannot be taught, it must be learned,"[6] and gave no lectures or assignments. Rather, the students selected their own projects and direction, with guidance from the masters. Grotell's concern was not to influence students by her own work, which was hidden in her office as her own reference library of results, but to answer their questions indirectly, with a story or an observation of nature. Such oblique guidance might not make sense to her questioners until days later. On one occasion, when presented with two tall vases for evaluation, she tried a more direct approach. She told the student they were nice, but she didn't like them. Concerned that her reaction was not understood, she puzzled for days over a way to clarify her feelings, and finally brought some newspaper articles to the young woman, explaining:

We are very different, you and I. I am a heavy person. These newspaper articles call my work "stolid"—my work is heavy. You are thin, nervous, quick, and energetic. Your vases remind me of tall, skinny ladies wearing high-heeled shoes. Your ware does not seem stable to me.[7]

Grotell made her reputation in glaze research at a time when very little had been published on the subject beyond its use in industry. Ironically, the careful measuring of materials she observed in Dr. Binns's class had not been her experience in Finland. Rather, she prepared a glaze on an instinctive level, much as a chef, familiar with the nature of culinary ingredients, would prepare a sauce. It was not until the administration at Henry Street Crafts School objected to her passing on "pinch" and "handful" recipes to students that she had to painstakingly convert her "kitchen ceramics," as she called it, to more accurate measurements in grams.[8]

In keeping with the general practice of the time, Grotell's formulas were available only when a student expressed a desire for a particular result. She would then consult her stenographer's notebook of untitled formulas, which carried no description or indication of temperature, and carefully choose one the student could copy. Beyond that, students were expected to do research and gain from their own experiments.

In those early years, Cranbrook students did not fire the kilns themselves, but were allowed to load the ware, observe procedures, and ask questions. Grotell would not only entrust the kilns to no one else, but she had little faith in the kilns' mechanical instruments either. In all weather, even during the heaviest snowfall, she could be seen walking the path to the kiln room from her apartment. On most Saturday nights around midnight, her students knew they could find her sitting in the kiln room, watching a firing and reading copies of *Natural History.*

This magazine was a source of great inspiration to her. Some of her earliest childhood recollections involved walking in the woods with her mother, hunting mushrooms or collecting wildflowers. Her cylinders and spheres (the two forms she favored) began to reflect this interest as she abandoned geometric designs in the 1940s. Over a variety of surfaces, she brushed Albany slip in linear patterns suggesting movement, or cut through a glaze or layers of slip to expose the clay body in these formations. In later work, the patterns of her lines became more complex, recalling birds in flight, the movement of clouds, or the shape of lightning. These images, she explained, one sees "in rocks, in plants, in waves. . . . I use these wings not as decoration but as movement, to contrast with form and color."[9]

Under these linear accents are rich surfaces, built from *pâte sur pâte* applications of slips. During the forties she and her contemporaries—Glen Lukens, Gertrude and Otto Natzler, Marguerite Wildenhain, Laura Andreson—became more interested in the unglazed surface. This more casual, natural-looking, decorative approach contrasts sharply with the previous period of sleek, precise decoration. A changing concept of beauty allowed the finger ridges of wheel-thrown ware to texture the pot's surface. Grotell was responsive to these sensibilities and began to explore color in clay bodies, often leaving the clay itself unglazed, textured only by slips or the marks of fingers and tools.

At the same time, certain glaze problems continued to hold her interest, such as the complexities of local and atmospheric reduction,[10] which led her to explore formulas for copper red and copper-bearing ash glazes, and the intense blues and crackle patterns of alkaline glazes. While experimenting with iron, which she found easier to reduce

than copper, she brushed a Bristol-type glaze over Albany slip. The slip bubbled through the pits and pinholes characteristic of a Bristol glaze, creating rings that did not "heal" during the firing. Through further experiments, she found she could control the size and placement of the rings by the thickness of the glaze application. By 1949, after ten years of research, she had this technique under control and her "leopard skin" vase took a prize at the Fourteenth Ceramic National Exhibition (1950) in Syracuse. Combining the bubbled glaze with linear accents occupied her during the fifties, until she felt she had explored all the possibilities: *Discovering new ways of doing interests me most. Once I have mastered a glaze, a form, an idea, I lose interest and move on to something else.*[11]

In the late fifties, Grotell found a challenge in developing a copper blue glaze that would not burn out, or lose its brilliance, at cone ten (approximately 2300°F). By this time she had expanded her linear accents to rhythmic sections of inlaid glazes—large surface areas that echo natural forms in shape.

Though constitutionally a strong person, Grotell constantly overtaxed her physical abilities, throwing heavy shelves for the lab's round Denver kiln, or hauling bricks to rebuild a kiln. Her own ceramic work often began at midnight and this lack of attention to her health caused concern among her students. In 1961, about the time a muscle condition began to seriously plague her arms and legs, limiting her ability to throw, she was presented with the Charles Fergus Binns Medal for outstanding achievement in ceramics. She continued to teach, but because she was never a prolific producer, and because she took such care with each piece, her own progress was painstakingly slow.

On her retirement in 1966, Maija Grotell could look back over remarkable changes in ceramics, changes that recorded increasing recognition for work in clay. The national and international honors she received were responsible in large measure for the attention focused on the American artist-potter. Moreover, in the face of ceramic sculpture's challenge to the vessel aesthetic during the thirties and forties, she and a few others kept the vessel a viable genre and prepared the way for later generations to expand on its possibilities. In a sense, she raised a generation of ceramists to whom she gave the clear message that "independence is crucial to one's development as an artist."[12] And along with Gertrud and Otto Natzler, who also experimented with bubble or crater glazes, she brought new dimensions to the surface enrichment of pottery.

1. Interview with Marthe Lauretzen conducted by the author, 1975.*
2. Interview with Vivika and Otto Heino for the Archives of American Art by the author, 1981.
3. Lee Nordness, Objects: USA *(New York: The Viking Press, 1970), pp. 19–20.*
4. The Bauhaus (1919–1933), a design school directed by Walter Gropius, operated in the belief that all the arts, practiced as crafts, should work together under the guidance of architecture in order to produce "a total work of art."
5. Joy Hakanson, "Cranbrook," Craft Horizons *(May–June 1959), pp. 18–20.*
6. Ibid.
7. Interview with Rhoda Lopez by the author, 1979.*
8. Ibid.
9. Joy Hakanson, "A Visit with Maija Grotell," The Detroit News *(August 28, 1960), p. 20.*
10. Reduction results when there is insufficient oxygen in the kiln to completely burn the fuel gases. The oxides contained in clay body and glaze are "reduced" by carbon monoxide and other hydrocarbon gases, thereby changing the surface's color and texture.
11. Hakanson (1960).
12. Unpublished letter from John Glick, 1979.*
In addition to the above, I should like to mention correspondence from Richard DeVore (1979), Jessica Price* (1981), and Jeff Schlanger* (1979).*

**Indicates former students of Maija Grotell.*

Elaine Levin is a frequent contributor to American Craft, Ceramics Monthly, Artweek, *and other publications. As a curator, she recently organized the Glen Lukens retrospective, which opens at California State University, Los Angeles, in January 1982. She is also at work on a* History of American Ceramics, *to be published by Watson-Guptill Publications.*

The City *(1930), 10⅝" (26.9 cm) high, ceramic. Collection Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.*

Bowl *(1955), 5½" (13.9 cm) high, ceramic. Courtesy Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.*

Bennett Bean

by Janet Koplos

Bennett Bean does not strive for a single, unified visual effect. His recent vessels are so related it's hard to separate them, yet so individual they seem to reflect the infinite, subtle variations of nature. Nor is there a sense of completion or finality. Rather, there is a sense of process. Time is an important element in these works, and that includes the potter's real time of making each pot. Implied time is equally important. Pit firing and altering refer to traditional techniques and to primitive pots that show the hand of the maker. The colors employed likewise seem to speak of ancient decorative arts, such as the Amarna wall painting of Egypt. By combining the forms and smoky blackness associated with Native American pottery and the warm colors and complexity associated with Mediterranean pottery, Bean concocts a recognizable, familiar object that is nonetheless an abstract symbol.

Time is further suggested by the fragmentation and incompleteness of the surface decoration. One thinks of chipping plaster, peeling wallpaper, splintered paneling, fading paint—the alteration of surfaces over time, both through intentional redecorating and through the caprice of such natural forces as weather.

Nothing is seen in its wholeness; rather, one decorative scheme obliterates another. In painting, this sort of layering is sometimes used to create an illusion of depth. That is not Bean's purpose. The illusionary space on these pots is only that fraction of an inch where one flat surface treatment breaks off to reveal another.

The question immediately arises: why is Bean using the vessel? Why not elaborate these surfaces on something flat—a canvas or a tile? But that might be too obvious and too simple. Bean achieves an intriguing complexity because the form and surface are not as predictably related as they would be on a canvas or tile. It's that little surprise that makes one stop and ponder, that encourages a meditative consideration of the objects as art, rather than a superficial appreciation of color or some other pleasing characteristic.

Vessel *(1981), pit-fired clay. Courtesy Elizabeth Fortner Gallery, Santa Barbara, California. Photo: D. James Dee.*

The pot form also contributes to this effect, in that an important aspect of three-dimensional form is our fascination with the unrevealed side. These pots cannot be seen wholly; only fitting for surfaces that are also complicated, incomplete, and secretive.

Bean does not seize upon the potential of volume, however. The vessels' interiors are not developed, and most are plain flat black. Yet he is clearly interested in *shape.* Other artists, perhaps more frequently in glass than in clay, use the vessel format as a three-dimensional canvas, concentrating only on exterior surface by using blanks. In other words, the form repeats, it's a given, and all attention is focused on the exterior surface. Bean does not do that. He offers a great many variations on vessel form—squat, tapering, flaring, cylindrical, you name it. Form is nearly as variable as the surface.

It's not always successful. The forms are not always sufficient in themselves, and in one's perception of a group of pieces, form is attended to secondarily. Perhaps he stays with the vessel because of the social and historical connection, because of his interest in primitive pottery. Even so, the forms do not always afford the best vantage point for the surface decoration. Our view is particularly impeded on rounded bases, where the decoration continues to the foot and is lost in the contour. These pieces must be displayed nearly at eye level to avoid that problem, and also so as not to call attention to the uninteresting interiors.

Bean frequently comments on form through his decoration. On most pieces, he applies irregular horizontal banding that echoes the lip, foot, and occasional throwing marks. On two beaker forms, he also uses slightly diagonal lines that call attention to irregularities in the profile of the vessel.

It's curious—and appealing—that despite the complication of surface, the broken colors, the maximum contrast of white and black, and the punctuation of other quite vivid hues, the overall effect is one of softness, ease, and comfort. He achieves that effect by a sophisticated balance, as when he balances intensity with space. On one vessel, for example, a small, amoebic motif in blue and green with a dark red stroke is repeated around the pot. It might have faded into oblivion beside more strongly colored pots, but Bean calls attention to the motif by giving it lots of room, setting it off with emptiness. This is simply good design, carefully considered.

In Bean's vessels, one finds support for the theory that the role of the artist is to find order in chaos. Bean sets up the chaos, and masters it. There are fluid brushmarks on the undersurface, large swaths of obliterating white, speckles resembling pitting or mildew, black rising like smoke, confetti-like snippets of bright colors, and repeated textile-inspired motifs. Amidst all that, tiny color bands emerge from the disorder as if trying to structure existence. The surfaces are like the softness of memories caught in the more rigid framework of history.

The work reviewed here was on view at Synopsis Gallery, Winnetka, Illinois (July 10–August 19, 1981). A subsequent show of Bennett Bean's vessels took place at Elizabeth Fortner Gallery, Santa Barbara, California (October 2–November 8, 1981).

Janet Koplos is crafts editor for the New Art Examiner. *In 1978 she was awarded an art critic's fellowship by the National Endowment for the Arts.*

Richard DeVore

by Alan G. Artner

No living artist in any medium has given this writer greater pleasure than the remarkable ceramist Richard DeVore. As reasons, one could cite the many ways in which he has challenged himself by working within a venerable tradition and bringing to it an awareness that characterizes the finest contemporary art. But that is only the beginning. It does not really help us to determine the singularity of DeVore's achievement.

The exhibition of nine plates and vessels at Exhibit A Gallery puts us in touch with something that runs deeper. To be sure, the craft of this work is masterly. It grows from years of patience and perseverance. None of the formal decisions looks casual. None of the ground was easily won.

Yet DeVore's perfection of surface and form always is linked to human feeling. There is a need to make each vessel an exquisite object that expresses inner states, alternately tumultuous, cloistered, sensuous, and pure. So this profoundly visual art engages both the mind and spirit. It embodies, refines, and translates some of the most basic impulses of life.

The skin of each vessel recalls the skin of the human body, with the delicate tissue being explored in all its varying states. It may be unblemished or scarred, stretched tight or relaxed, mottled or smooth. But what the eye sees is not always confirmed. The roughest textures can feel velvety, and if touched, the most brutal gouges can seduce.

Such deception is carried a step further in the play between DeVore's actual and implied volumes. Almost without exception, the interior of each vessel suggests a vastness that the fixity of external shape limits and denies. One hesitates to make this into a metaphor, but the pieces that are most strongly related to fragments of torsos can prompt reflections of a more philosophical sort. Call it possibility as opposed to reality. The idea is not one the artist would be eager to deny.

In fact, DeVore uses the vessel only as a receptacle for shared impressions about a great many natural phenomena. Each rim, with notches often indicating points of the compass, carries a landscape reference. This is nothing literal, of course, but still it evokes the geophysical balance of escarpments, valleys, and mediating hills. Sometimes the rim is accompanied by a second horizon line on the surface that refers to the artist's earlier double-walled vessels, or just as easily, to worlds within worlds.

Then there is DeVore's meditation on sexuality, for several works bear orifices, hidden parts, and suggestive folds. These can be taken only as evidence of the craftsman's virtuosity, but they are as much a celebration of the female body as Lachaise's monumental pudenda and Giacometti's pelvic spoons. Here the vessel touches upon art of the ancients, transmitting notions of fertility.

After all, vessels long have played a part in primitive rituals, and DeVore is mindful of their magic. The hieratic atmosphere of incantations and transmutations may be set before us through the use of a dark and spidery crackle glaze or a vein that seems to pulse from the bottom of a deceptively shallow plate. Each reinforces the sense of the unexpected, of life arising from inchoate matter, of clay being turned into metaphorical gold.

The artist regards a vessel as an active agent, rather than a passive object, that embodies equal parts of tradition and individual talent. Yet as we emphasize the scope of his symbolic aspirations, it is crucial to recognize how beautifully the works occupy a place on the continuum of ceramic history. Few craftsmen in our time have assimilated the tradition as completely as DeVore and even fewer have attempted to restate it in such a way as to be exciting and relevant.

Still, the staggering achievement comes from having preserved the integrity of the vessel, and without irony or waggishness, brought it into close relation with the so-called fine arts. DeVore did this by subjecting his craft to imperatives not at all different from those of a contemporary painter or sculptor. Yet he also dared to revive the entire humanistic substructure that for so long was banished from the work one most often encounters in our galleries.

This being 1981, the force of his thrust perhaps has been blunted, as our pluralistic times smile on such forays into what once was considered a lesser area of creativity. But it is nonetheless sobering to note that DeVore is yet to be granted a major survey in an American art museum. There clearly will be some catching up in the decade ahead, with results confirming the high regard already held by visitors to this splendid show.

The exhibition reviewed here took place at Exhibit A Gallery, Chicago (May 9–June 19, 1981).

Alan G. Artner is art critic for the Chicago Tribune. *This essay first appeared there June 5, 1981. Copyright 1981 Chicago Tribune. Used with permission.*

Untitled Vessel *(1978), 11¼" (28.6 cm) in diameter. Courtesy Exhibit A Gallery, Chicago. Photo: Ken Westphal.*

Cliff Garten

by Robb Mitchell

Cliff Garten engenders a species of ceramics with a clear notion of its history, yet he does not literally make a pot, a container, or a vessel. He addresses the issues of volume, containment, and surface and, in spite of himself, ends up with a vessel.

His repeated use of the elongated oval form, which is both phallic and vaginal, points to the resile shape of human sexual construction. Garten uses this form to engage the viewer in a sexual metaphor. It remains, however, that the material processes and the formal traditions of ceramic making are essential: the vessel and the history of its body in volume; the skin and its undulating concave and convex dependencies, which assume their metaphoric counterparts in the undulate walls of the vessel.

Hold-Back comprises three elements. The first is an elongated oval made of Egyptian paste, which in its construction Garten negates the body-vessel character of traditional pottery by weaving together strings of ceramic beads. This beaded form is hung a short distance away from the wall, hovering over its base. The base is a vessel that is also an elongated oval. It rests in a papier-mâché boat that enshrines the vessel in an altarlike arrangement. These two base pieces rest on a pedestal eighteen inches above the floor, which underscores its altarlike nature.

In this work, Garten addresses a number of issues specifically endowed with historical meaning within the tradition of vessel making and decoration. He is able to make "vessels" that are concise statements about containment and the relation of internal and external forms—the ways in which they draw in and contain or surround—and that are at the same time objects that displace space and affront us.

The solidity of the base pieces, with their constructed physical containment, coupled with the extended visual transparency of the beaded oval create a two-fold physicality. The first is the virtual volume of the vessel, resident in the base, the other is the implied volume of the transparent beaded oval and the shadow it casts onto the wall.

Unlust consists of two forms: the elongated oval and a rectangle, both of which are made up of woven beads. These forms are suspended parallel to the wall, with the oval above the rectangle. Because of their transparency, color, and lighting arrangement, they seem to float in mid-air. The porcelain beads of the rectangle, which have been raku-fired to a dense coal black, are lavishly rich in surface texture and color. The transparency of the woven structure coupled with the lighting, which creates the effect of suspended clay fabrics, produces an implied volume. This physical contradiction of material arising out of "implied volume"—hung curtains that seem to float, flat forms that create volume, baseless physical mass that refers to vessel issues—establishes a visual tension that extends into the obviously masculine qualities of the lower rectangle and the feminine form above.

"Unlust," as a term, describes desire in relation to the *concordia discors*[1] of bifold sexuality. The interaction between these two shapes is of appeal and repel, conforming to the tension of the work and manifesting a mutual reduction of desire.

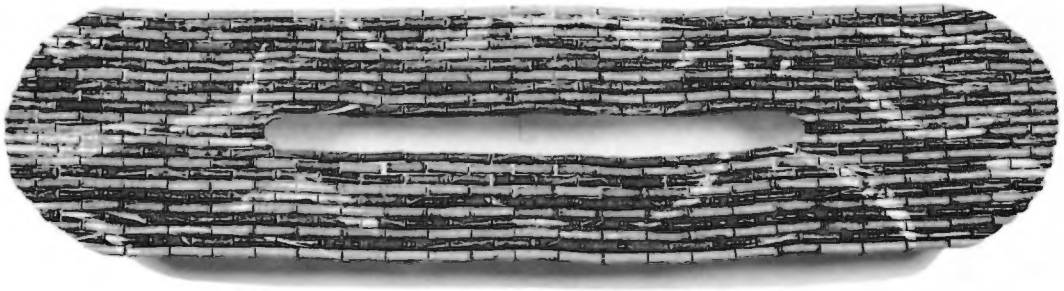
Unlike the beaded oval in *Hold-Back,* these two pieces are not anchored in the premise of the vessel and the solidity of the base. *Unlust* is much more dependent on its transparency and the implied volume mentioned earlier. However, the issues here center about ceramics, and ultimately their strength lies in Garten's understanding of and adherence to its history.

There are in Cliff Garten's ceramics emblematic relationships to sexual form, but these are important as they relate to volume, containment, and form generally. Garten's sensitive treatment of these issues draws out the relationships between claywork and human sensuality.

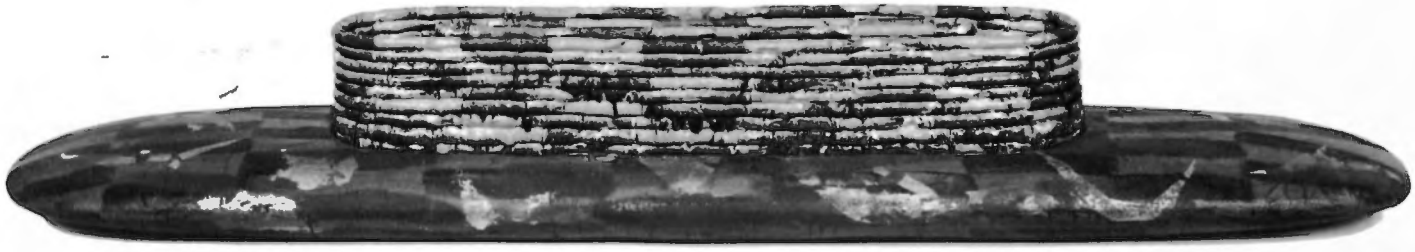
Artist and critic Cliff Garten was the subject of a solo exhibition at Rochester Art Center, Minnesota (March 7–29, 1981).

1. In the Ars Poetica, *Horace speaks of the harmony to be found in discord.*

Robb Mitchell is a critic living in Minneapolis who writes criticism for Minnesota Artist Exhibition Program publications.



Hold Back, *72" (182.9 cm) long, Egyptian paste, porcelain, wire, gold leaf, enamel paint.*



Margie Hughto

by David Revere McFadden

The recent work by Margie Hughto exhibited at André Emmerich Gallery this year comprised a selected number of related ceramic collages, known as her *Fan* series. In one sense, the show was less than surprising since we have become accustomed to Hughto's *Fan* format, but it is this very familiarity with and anticipation of her *format* that may interfere with an understanding of the individual works. Wall-mounted pieces predominated, but certain sculptures were allowed independence on pedestals as free-standing collages. The colors, ranging from pastel and muted rose pinks through a variety of moist blue greens, are intentionally and immediately seductive. The delicacy of the colors embedded within the clay is by no means a final statement, for these colors begin to erode upon closer examination into textures, fissures, and jewels of glaze crystals. Other vital aspects of Hughto's work are the continued experimentation with texture to achieve an instable and fluctuating tonality, and the use of color itself to both build and disintegrate form.

Hughto's works in clay, as well as her sympathetic parallel essays in paper pulp, achieve a union of format and poetic content related to landscape painting. Not surprisingly, early works by Hughto included clay vessels decorated with landscape evocations. However, the artist herself readily admits that the fan format was "something I fell into," and also that this particular format has provided a structure for her continued experiments with color, texture, and the technique of clay collage.

A comparison of Hughto's work with the landscape sensibility opens several areas of inquiry into the language of content in the *Fans*. A majority of landscapes have been and continue to be painted within a flat, rectangular format. Certainly we do not view or experience landscape itself in such a rigid, geometric, cross-sectional form, but rather as a segment of the visible world. The format of landscape painting, however, is more than a simple expedient or convention, and certainly more than the trite "picture window" theory art appreciation allows. By its very nature, the format reiterates the fact that the external world is only perceived from an internal vantage point. The separation of landscape from nature by means of a format is precisely what allows us to perceive it as landscape. In this sense, the format clarifies our vision by indicating that we must always be in an ambivalent position to what we see and experience.

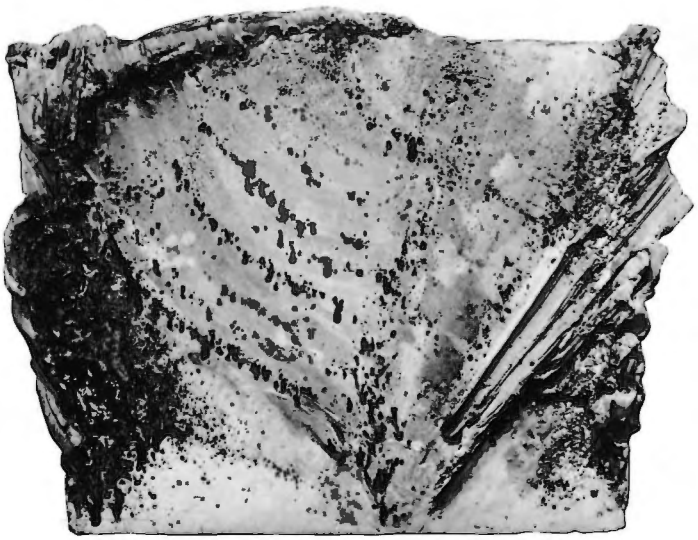
Margie Hughto's work records this peculiarly human ambivalence toward landscape, but also raises issues of perception. As landscape is viewed as a unified totality of sensation and perception, so, too, is it the recognition and combination of details of texture and surface. Hughto's work, on an obvious level, implies the expanding and limitless panorama of a vista; upon closer observation, the vista shifts to a poetic and introspective archaeological study of a small segment of the landscape. The scraped, layered, exposed, and peeled structure of these works suggest the remnants of an undeciphered cross-section of a natural organism or a forgotten human habitation. Much as a wall may reveal the history of the lives it surrounded through the layers of paint added over time, which are revealed when scraped back, Hughto's fans speak of a multiplicity of experiences that may be signalled in our memories by colors and textures. More than landscape and more than archaeology, they are the gesture of landscapes in time.

Often overlooked in Hughto's fans are the strong underpinnings of a rectangle, sometimes visible as a negative impression of a "frame" over which the fan has spread. Created by the actual wooden frame into which the slabs of clay are pressed, the reverse image becomes an invisible frame for a landscape it cannot contain. The works combine elements of the collage technique with the perception of a watercolorist; blended and muted colors dissolve into patterns and textures created by combs, kitchen forks, and fingers—all of which leave a signature of their presence in the landscape, embedded forever in the substrata. The surfaces may also combine the soft colors impregnated in the clay with fissures and excrescences created by sharp crystals of glaze dropped or pressed into the clay.

From the flat, two-dimensional compositions of the past few years, Hughto's work has grown progressively three-dimensional. It can only be hoped that further experiments will continue to capture the special sense of vision we have seen in the *Fans*, and that the work will continue to function within and beyond the format.

The work reviewed here was shown at André Emmerich Gallery, New York (June 4–July 3, 1981). Hughto has also exhibited at Thomas Segal Gallery, Boston; Nina Freudenheim Gallery, Buffalo, New York; and James Yaw Gallery, Birmingham, Michigan.

David Revere McFadden, decorative arts historian, was formerly curator of Decorative Arts at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, and now holds that position at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Design, in New York.



Red Garnets *(1981), 29" (73.6 cm) high, colored clays. Courtesy André Emmerich Gallery, New York. Photo: Grant Barker.*

Phillip Maberry

by Judy S. Schwartz

Untitled *(1981), 17¼" (44.5 cm) in diameter. Courtesy Hadler/Rodriguez Gallery, New York.*

Phillip Maberry is one of a handful of American artists who has chosen to work within the vessel format, although his is the abstracted, geometric vessel—the cone and the hemisphere. Maberry's preoccupation is with pattern, but not pattern as optical illusion or as color-field relationship, but pattern such as Mondrian employed in his painting, *Broadway Boogie-Woogie.* Mondrian transformed repeating colors and shapes into patterns of pulsating rhythms; pattern and color became tempo, beat, and staccato energy.

In his recent book, *Shock of the New,* Robert Hughes describes Mondrian's ability to fuse a love of boogieing and a love of jazz rhythms into the patterns of the New York City street grid. "Once one has seen *Broadway Boogie-Woogie,*" Hughes testifies, "the view from a skyscraper down into the streets is changed forever." Phillip Maberry creates a similar effect in his most recent work, but the music is updated from jazz to New Wave, the palette from taxicab yellow to outrageous hot pinks and chartreuses, and the patterns from geometric grids to jelly beans, boomerangs, and the tigerlike zigzags of today's popular Punk subculture.

Maberry's objects have always been alluring, for two reasons. First, his fragile porcelain structures were clad in mouth-watering sherbet colors such as strawberry pink, lime green, raspberry red, and lemon yellow; and second, the interplay of one colored pattern upon another created a razzle-dazzle effect. All too often, however, the effect did not sustain our interest; the objects remained pleasant, playfully colored surface designs. Moreover, the works were too dependent on proximity for effect. For example, the dots and dashes of one bowl often needed the contrast generated by the spiral pattern of a neighboring cone to achieve the desired impact.

Happily, in a recent exhibition Maberry's strong color instinct and great facility with pattern have come to fruition. All the key elements—color, pattern, and form—are integrated so as to cause the gallery's environment to vibrate with a rhythm and energy seldom seen. Maberry no longer limits himself to porcelain, but combines a variety of materials. He paints fabrics (executed at Philadelphia's Fabric Workshop), which he stretches over kitelike forms hung from the walls, and hand-painted Spandex fabric, which he stretches pillowcase fashion over chairs. He makes use of a wallpaper roller to relief paint all the bases that support his porcelain forms. The pale pastel colors of the past have given way to hot pinks, cobalt blues, vibrant turquoise blues, blacks, and chartreuses. The form vocabulary of cones and spheres has been expanded to include plates, flattened cones, fan shapes, and mosaics. Finally, each object is decorated, so that hardly a single space is free of pattern or color.

The saturation of color and pattern taken together forms an environment that nearly overwhelms the senses. Phillip Maberry's art forces us to ask: How saturated an experience can the senses process effectively? What are the limits of color and pattern tolerance? Maberry seems to suggest that these limits must be explored, that like our solar system, the boundaries may be limitless.

Phillip Maberry's recent work was on view at Hadler/Rodriguez Galleries, New York (May 16–June 6), and at Delahunty Gallery, Dallas (June 13–July 11, 1981).

Judy S. Schwartz has taught ceramic sculpture at New York University, and is art advisor to the Gallatin Division.

Ronna Neuenschwander

by Louise Klemperer

Ronna Neuenschwander's cast and modeled sculptures portray the human use of elephants in making war in ancient times and the contemporary use of war-elephants, or tanks. The present works display tendencies already evident in her undergraduate days at the University of Kansas—the most notable being the range of contexts from humorous to archaic and mysterious.

The theme of elephants used in war undergoes many transformations here, the largest group being ten pieces dealing with the Semiramis legend. When Assyrian Queen Semiramis (circa 800 B.C.) waged war in India, she wished to capitalize on the Indian custom of using trained elephants to intimidate the enemy. Not having elephants, Semiramis ordered life-sized elephant puppets made from hides, which were stuffed and mounted on camels. Neuenschwander imaginatively portrays these odd configurations. In the last piece of the series, two small warriors, sans elephant, imitate an elephant as best they can: one stands on a chair, the other stands on the first one's back, with hands extended to approximate the size and shape of an elephant's ears.

There is much variety both in glaze and form. Two sculptures are glazed white; one is sawdust-fired in variegated grays; several are touched with acrylic paint and graduate from almost black to highlights of magenta, blue, or gold; several are glazed in low-fire colors, including T'ang dynasty–style camels in the green, tan, and white of three-color ware. Although the nearly monochromatic treatment of the acrylic pieces tends to bring each element together in visual terms, in other pieces Neuenschwander is just as content to treat each contrasting part with a contrasting glaze.

Then there are six larger warriors, wearing tank parts for protection, three wearing elephant hides. Depictions of other uses of elephants in war round out the show: Kublai Khan and his warriors in a castle on top of four elephants, a simulated-wood *Trojan Elephant,* and a large letter from King Mongkut offering President Lincoln elephants for military transportation.

A problem that has bothered me about Neuenschwander's work over the years—an apparent multiplicity of approaches—is here resolved. The multiplicity is certainly there, in the variety of glaze treatments and formal details, but much more basic is the multiplicity of attitudes. In what spirit are we intended to perceive this work? Some pieces are obviously humorous, others strangely mysterious, most a combination of these qualities. The implied context ranges from the ancient past, to imitation T'ang, to contemporary kitsch. Neuenschwander also shifts context by frequently using readymade molds. Elements of her sculptures will be recognized by many as replicas of knickknacks. They maintain this identity, even as they become part of a new series of meanings.

The most interesting multiplicity lies in Neuenschwander's treatment of realism. These fantasies are all based on "real," or at least recorded, historical incidents. Each element is realistically portrayed, yet the entire assemblage is quite improbable. Details heighten the sense of realism, while simultaneously causing the viewer to question how realistic this tableau can be. What is real? Within ceramics, the work this most closely resembles is that of Patti Warashina. While both artists use realistic imagery to portray fantasies, one of Neuenschwander's main themes is the ambiguous nature of reality, while Warashina uses illusionistic realism in pursuit of other goals.

When one realizes that the ambiguities and the multiplicities of purpose are not accidental, but central to the work, this ambiguity becomes the work's strength. These shifting realities are just one more expression of our time—a time when physicists speak of probabilities, when avant-garde theater shifts within moments from perfectly logical occurrences to the absurd and back again, and when, as Susan Sontag wrote perceptively in *Against Interpretation,* "Reality is not that unequivocal; life is not that lifelike."

Neuenschwander uses humor to deal with these ambiguities. Humor makes some viewers uncomfortable; they feel if it's funny, it can't be serious. Also, after Pop and Funk ceramics, it is very hard to use realistic imagery and come off as totally sincere. However, humor in this work functions on several levels. As a distancing device, for example, it allows both artist and viewer to temper discomfort with the ambiguous nature of perceived reality, and with war, human vulnerability, and aggression.

The few pieces in this show that seem weak suffer from too much humor and not enough ambiguity; they are difficult to distinguish from the knickknacks to which they ironically refer. Most of the sculptures, however, invite the viewer to move beyond their intriguing visual presentations to a contemplation of their many layers of allusion and meaning.

"Elephants: Assorted Histories" by Ronna Neuenschwander was on view at Contemporary Crafts Gallery, Portland, Oregon (August 27–September 25, 1981).

Louise Klemperer, a free-lance writer and a regular contributor to Portland's Fresh Weekly, *teaches design at the Oregon School of Arts and Crafts.*

Queen Semiramis's War Elephant #2 *(1981), 13" (33 cm) high, white earthenware, sawdust fired. Photo: Jerome Hart.*

Don Reitz

by Raylene Decatur

Private Space *(1979), 35" (88.9 cm) high, salt-glazed stoneware. Courtesy Greenwood Gallery, Washington, D.C.*

Don Reitz's concepts and techniques have remained unexpectedly consistent through the past twenty years. The importance of the salt-glaze technique is still paramount, giving him the freedom to complete pieces in a single session. He elaborates on this point in his statement for the Greenwood show: "The process itself is a very physical and theatrical one, which is part of me. It was as natural for me to turn to salt for the final ingredient in my work as it was for me to do all that which preceded it in my life. The work seemed to deserve nothing less." He delights in the physical and emotional energy generated as he produces his work, and wants this spontaneous energy to be apparent in the finished pieces. It is.

Reitz continues to explore functional objects such as punch bowls, pitchers, plates, and large floor containers, which are predominant. The functional forms, familiar domestic objects, are rendered useless by their scale. They become subjects of contemplation, studies of sculptural form. The floor containers express a vocabulary of repeated forms; spheres, cylinders, ridges, and tapered columns of various dimensions are combined to form spheres atop columns, cylinders terminating in spheres, cylinders connected by ridges, and so on. Reitz's masterful sense of design keeps these shapes fresh and interesting, making repetition of form a creative exercise rather than an exercise in tedium. The surfaces are similar from piece to piece, yet always unique and unexpected. There are unanticipated lumps, bumps, and lines applied to or cut into the clay; roughly made finials and handles are juxtaposed against smooth thrown surfaces; colors range from yellow beige to black. The black forms are especially striking, implying the religious weightiness of a canopic jar or reliquary.

Three painted panels represent a new direction for this artist. Reitz says the panels provide a forum for him to express ideas unrelated to his functional forms. Splashes and layers of colored slips create texture and surface variations; patches of blue, green, brown, and creamy white, similar to the glazes employed on his three-dimensional forms, provide color. Ordered groups of X's and O's represent to him the additions and subtractions we experience in life. Reitz wants to paint more about life, and life events, but these panels do not yet seem to project the narrative he seeks to express. Furthermore, the slab forms lack the vitality of his three-dimensional pieces. Reitz needs to make the surface of the clay a more significant, integral part of the slab to justify the use of clay as a painting surface.

The plates exhibited provide a transition from the functional pieces and floor vessels to the decorated slabs. They represent Reitz's interest in the plate as a structure, as do Peter Voulkos's plate series. Unlike the Voulkos plates, however, which make a statement regarding form, Reitz's platters focus their expression on surface decoration and color. The most successful of these combines dense slip-glaze decoration with a ribbed surface texture.

Finally, it is Don Reitz's ability to capitalize on clay's supple nature, and to infuse that yielding substance with dynamic energy, that pleases us most.

The work by Don Reitz reviewed here was exhibited at Greenwood Gallery, Washington, D.C. (June 4–30, 1981).

Raylene Decatur is a writer living in Washington, D.C.; since 1978, she has been with the Renwick Gallery, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Betty Woodman

by Susan Wechsler

When Betty Woodman graduated from the School for American Craftsmen in 1950, she felt she "knew all the rules." She had a clear, though narrow, conception of a "good pot," based on an Oriental aesthetic as interpreted by Bernard Leach. Upon arriving in Italy a year later, Woodman quickly realized these rules were unimportant. Potters there were making colorful, exciting earthenwares; their forms and decorations displayed a casual blending of elements from other cultures. This exuberant Italian work challenged the reserved formality of traditional Oriental bowls and vases, as well as their strict interpretation of function.

Woodman uses functional objects—*Asparagus Servers, Grape Baskets, Tea and Pastry Servers,* and *Pillow Pitchers*—as metaphors for the preparation and presentation of food. In her concern to make dinner a celebration rather than a "dull, brown affair," she forces us to question traditional notions of use. Being over life-size, her forms also defy traditional pottery scale. Her *Pillow Pitchers,* for instance, capture vast amounts of space; weighing nearly twenty-five pounds when empty, they would be nearly impossible to lift when full. But the familiarity of the form makes them easy to apprehend and enjoy, and enables one to more easily accept the issues of volume, sensuality, or pattern they so casually express. Pottery concerns are also expressed by her careful attention to handles, lips, edges, and feet, and it is from the potter's iconography that the work derives its strength.

Betty Woodman's forms are most of all about the nature of clay—its ability to stretch, lift, swell, and show the mark of its maker. Woodman's ease of manipulation with the wet material maintains the freshness and plasticity of her forms, even after firing. The vitality of fresh clay is recalled through skillful handling, its tactile qualities emphasized by finger marks, distortions, and other evidence of the hand. Vitality is also achieved by the tension between the historical influences on her work, such as Minoan, Etruscan, and Persian pottery, and the innovative treatment with which they are employed. The Etruscan's bravado with form is recalled by her bold, extended handles, while the form itself may reflect Middle Eastern precedents. The spout of a *Pillow Pitcher* may echo a Persian example, but its scale is exaggerated, its lift seemingly impossible, its extension to the very edge of clay's limits. In her newer *Breadstick Server,* the handles have been pushed even further to actually define the structure of the form. A central cylinder (container for the breadsticks?) and a flat, oval bottom anchor the handles, which outline large areas of negative space; these spaces also reiterate the fluidity and curve of the positive areas. The space the handles enclose lead the eye through, around, and above the cylinder form, made graceful by its undulate supports.

Woodman's sure treatment of clay results in simple forms capable of carrying complex surfaces. Echoing T'ang coloration and a variety of fabric designs, their richness compels the viewer to examine the work more closely. The artist is intrigued by complicated details (Baroque architecture, Islamic patterning), and she visually blends these various elements. Her occasional juxtaposition of solid color on one side of a vessel with patterning on the other, for example, complicate the otherwise clear silhouette of her forms (while recalling surfaces created by Oribe potters of Japan).

By contrast, recent pieces made in Italy are solid, celadon-like, with splotches of carbon from the primitive kerosene kiln she uses. The forms are crude, with a fussy application of sprigged clay. The ornate sprigs, although meant to be fluid, seem somewhat rigid and overworked; but the tension between complication and simplicity is an edge on which Woodman daringly chooses to balance.

In newer work, she extends her love of surface decoration and patterning to the creation of environments. Shaped and painted fabric portals surround the entrance of a room whose walls are punctuated by pilasters composed of clay tiles. In the center is a pedestal laid with containers that fit together in a variety of spatial patterns. Her translation into clay of elements from other disciplines, such as architecture, is once again successful in decoration and design, but the components remain three separate ideas held loosely together under the umbrella of an "environment." The vitality of the clay so evident in her vessels is lost in the flat pilaster forms. Successful or not, the environments are a clear indication that Woodman's art is constantly expanding, and deserves consideration in the broader spectrum of a truly decorative art.

Betty Woodman's work has recently been the subject of three solo exhibitions: at Hadler/Rodriguez Gallery, New York; Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia; Bennington College, Bennington, Vermont.

Susan Wechsler is the author of the recently published book, Low-Fire Ceramics: A New Direction in American Clay.

Asparagus Server *(1980), 26" (66 cm) long. Courtesy Hadler/Rodriguez Gallery, New York.*

Books

Porcelain: Traditions and New Visions, *by Jan Axel and Karen McCready. New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 1981. 200 pages. 36 color plates, 250 black-and-white illustrations. $30.00.*

Studio Porcelain: Contemporary Design and Techniques, *by Peter Lane. London: Pitman House Ltd. and Radnor, Pennsylvania: Chilton Book Company, 1980. 224 pages. 100 color plates, over 200 black-and-white illustrations. $30.00.*

The Arts and Crafts Movement in America 1876–1916, *edited by Robert Judson Clark. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972. 192 pages. 295 black-and-white illustrations. $35.00. $12.95 (paper).*

American Art Pottery, 1875–1930, *by Kirsten Hoving Keen. Wilmington: Delaware Art Museum, 1978. 84 pages. 149 black-and-white illustrations. $7.00 (paper).*

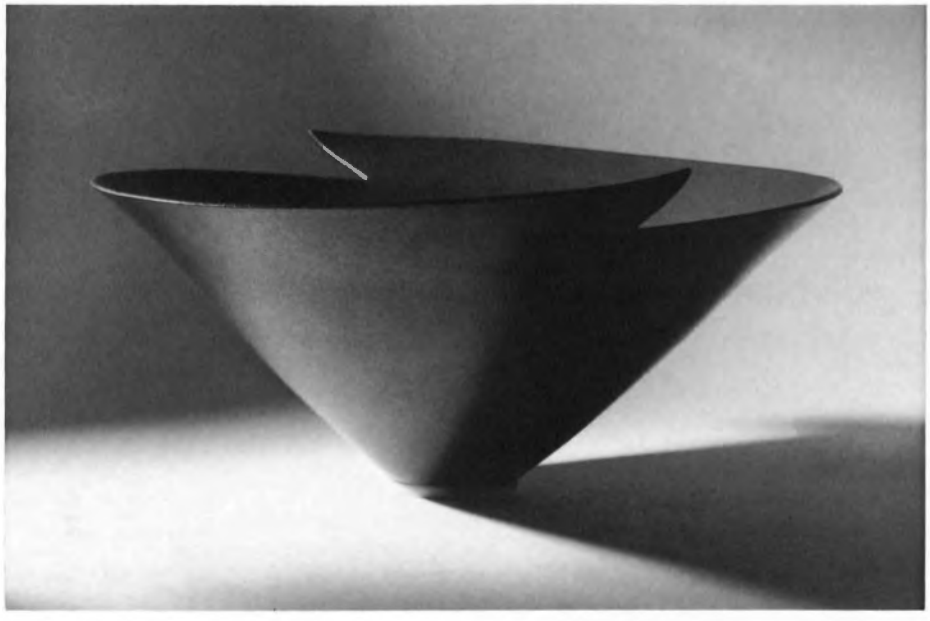
A Century of Ceramics in the United States, 1878–1978, *by Garth Clark and Margie Hughto. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1979. 372 pages. 40 color plates. 374 black-and-white illustrations. $12.95 (paper).*

The Ladies, God Bless 'Em: The Women's Art Movement in Cincinnati in the Nineteenth Century. *Cincinnati: Cincinnati Art Museum, 1976. 69 pages. 51 black-and-white illustrations. $3.00 (paper).*

Overglaze Imagery: Cone 019–016. *Fullerton: California State University Art Gallery, 1977. 206 pages. 41 color plates. 77 black-and-white illustrations.*

Porcelain

by Vanessa Lynn



Bowl *by Elsa Rady (1979), 5½" (131.9 cm) high, porcelain. Photo: Bob Lopez.*

In a field plagued by a dearth of good writers and a paucity of current literature, the appearance of two specialty publications demands serious attention. When a comparison reveals both to be of value, it is rare indeed. The two titles make for especially interesting comparison, since they claim similar objectives. In the American work, *Porcelain: Traditions and New Visions,* authors Jan Axel and Karen McCready seek to "survey and document the enormous scope of creative approaches to the material today." (p. 6) In *Studio Porcelain,* British author Peter Lane

attempts to assess something of the motivations, methods and techniques of some leading studio potters working almost exclusively in porcelain. The work is considered in relation to those delightful qualities of translucency, purity, delicacy, strength and tactile appeal which have made fine porcelain ceramics so highly prized. (p. 7)

Since both have the same bank of technical, historical, and artistic data to draw upon, certain similarities could be expected. And since both present the breadth of their material largely through the device of artistic example, one could expect even further overlap. And, in fact, there is much duplication of core information.

Yet, finally, these are radically different books. Lane has written an informative and elegant, but poorly organized trade tool on the craft of porcelain. Axel and McCready have managed a literate, contemporary survey of great visual appeal. As a bonus for their potentially broad-based audience, they offer a coherent, multifaceted discussion of the contemporary achievement in porcelain sculpture. In other words, Lane addresses the craft of porcelain, Axel and McCready, the art.

One need only compare the organizing foundation of each to understand this difference. In *Porcelain,* the authors weave their text over a carefully structured framework. After introducing the reader to an unusually lively history (aided by an excellent chapter on "Early Porcelain in Europe" by David R. McFadden, curator of decorative arts at New York's Cooper-Hewitt Museum), they illuminate the porcelain mystique through an unusual strategy—its unique physicality. Porcelain's whiteness, translucency, fluidity, and surface are each given their own chapter. And it is here that the authors have excelled. They have married enlightening, yet admirably nontechnical discussions of the physical and chemical properties of porcelain to a text whose scope encompasses a detailed, aesthetic explication of this venerated clay. The final sections concentrate on the objecthood of porcelain art: vessel, tea accoutrements, tableware and decoration, figurative and conceptual visions, as well as industrial implementations are each examined in a separate chapter.

The great value of this format is the way it logically constructs a unified

Molded Form *by Jacqueline Poncelet (1974), 4½" (11.5 cm) high, porcelain. Collection Daniel Jacobs.*

body of knowledge for the reader. The introductory history, for example, is not just an obligatory nod to porcelain's past. It becomes the factual underpinning for a historical leitmotif woven throughout. Thus, in the chapter on whiteness, the authors are free to discuss this quality historically: how the Chinese sought it, used it, valued it; how it subsequently dominated the European achievement in porcelain. Axel and McCready want their reader to know the historical genesis of modern porcelain aesthetics. They want their reader to grasp two facts, all too often ignored in the literature of ceramics—that meaningful art is never created in a historic or aesthetic vacuum; that enduring art is that which acknowledges, explores, redefines, and defies the art that came before it. Axel and McCready frequently place contemporary porcelain art in a proper aesthetic context. Their primarily American survey uses many tools to do so: socio-political history, science, technology, aesthetics, and philosophy. More often than not, the result is informative and eloquent.

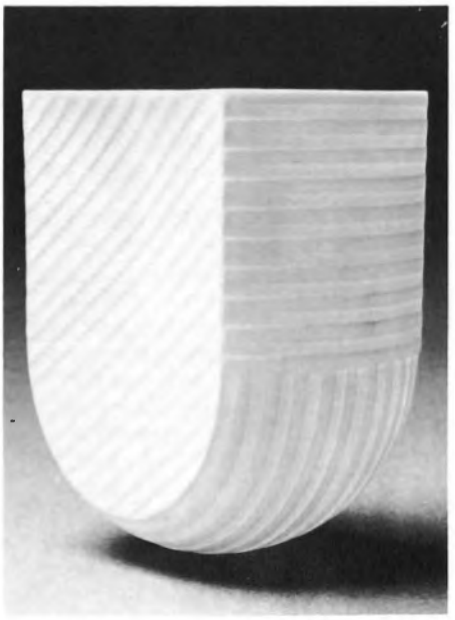
In marked contrast, Peter Lane relies upon discussions of technique and technology to structure his informative "contemporary international survey." Lane tries to illuminate an ideology of porcelain art with a candle of methodology. At this, he fails. The majority of his text is devoted to technical discussions of throwing, turning, and pinching, carving and impressing, and glazing and firing porcelain. Unfortunately, the technical information imparted is a bit too lean for the practicing artist, and much too rich for the layperson. He sought to achieve his original objectives by fortifying his technical discussions with sumptuous visual and enlightening verbal accompaniment. The pictoral images are strong, perhaps the greatest asset of the publication. But the commentary on specific work is weak; often it is only a line or two concerning a particular artist's method (rarely the artist's intent or content), which is meant to serve as "in-depth" discussion. The result is a choppy, disorganized narrative. Lane sought to assess contemporary porcelain, in part, through its "delightful qualities of translucency, purity, delicacy, strength and tactile appeal." Yet none of these have merited a chapter, and only translucency may be found in the index. Lane also sought his subject analysis through "the motivations, methods and techniques of some leading studio potters," but his choice of working structure leaves the text no room to comprehensively examine the ideas of a single artist's *oeuvre* in one place. Consequently, for information on the work of Jacqueline Poncelet, the index refers us to six scattered pages; Geoffrey Swindell must be pursued through eighteen varied references. Although the factual material necessary for fulfillment of his objectives is present more often than not, Lane unfairly demands a painstaking examination from his reader in order to extract that information.

I say unfairly because, unlike Axel and McCready, Peter Lane has not produced a readable contemporary survey. Instead, his could be evaluated as an idiosyncratic, introductory *textbook* for the accomplished ceramic artist. It is a textbook of such high graphic standard and generous, photographic inclusions that it immediately fills a gaping lacuna in the general, current literature on ceramic art. For it is, in fact, a visually satisfying contemporary survey of porcelain art, of a more international scope than the American publication.

I have labelled Lane's *Studio Porcelain* a textbook, yet refrained from reviewing it by an appropriate set of standards. That is because here, too, it would falter. The addition of three nontechnical chapters make it clear that the author wanted to produce more than a textbook, that he tried to address a broader audience. The result is a work that misses both marks. The practicing artist will be frustrated by Lane's frequent deferrals to alternate bibliographic sources for complete technical explication; the layperson will be worn out in a maze of technical jargon and esoterica.

Porcelain: Traditions and New Visions could be faulted for specific inclusions and exclusions. However, since the ceramic arts suffer from a dearth of critical literature, such judgments become subjective, as one cannot cite a body of literature to affirm or deny the stature of a given artist. But I will say the authors sometimes fail to identify those twentieth-century masters who have led the explorations responsible for these truly contemporary New Visions. Perhaps it is still too early in the development of a body of critical literature on porcelain art to expect any book to stand alone as the "definitive text" in this field. At this moment, we have an excellent visual survey of international score in Peter Lane's work, and a sophisticated blending of visual and verbal analysis in the major achievement of Jan Axel and Karen McCready.

Vanessa S. Lynn, former art and architecture librarian at Pratt Institute Library, Brooklyn, New York, is director of Cooper/Lynn Gallery, New York.



The American Arts and Crafts Movement

by Joanne Polster

Barely twenty-five years ago, products of the American Arts and Crafts Movement lay relatively unnoticed on the shelves and in the corners of antique and second-hand shops. Rookwood, Fulper, Marblehead, and Grueby were obscure names; Mission furniture couldn't be given away. Today these pieces command respect in prestigious galleries, museums, and auction rooms. I have always felt that the awakening of interest in this work can be credited to Robert Koch's article in the March 1960 issue of *Antiques.* His "Rookwood Pottery" sparked an appreciation of Rookwood in particular and Art Pottery in general that, I feel, led eventually to an investigation and re-evaluation of the American Arts and Crafts Movement as a whole. Fascination with the period 1876 to 1919 has produced a number of museum and gallery exhibitions documenting various aspects of this movement. Their accompanying catalogues contain informative essays tracing its antecedents, its philosophical and aesthetic foundations, its development, and its effects on later art and craft.

There is no question that Robert Judson Clark's *The Arts and Crafts Movement in America 1876–1916,* which accompanied the exhibition organized by him for The Art Museum of Princeton University, provided the impetus and set the standard for subsequent exhibitions and catalogues on this subject. Beautifully designed and illustrated, it offers an overview of the period in essays by Clark himself, David A. Hanks, Susan Otis Thompson, and Martin Eidelberg. The regional character of the movement is acknowledged in sections titled "The Eastern Seaboard," "Chicago and the Midwest," and "The Pacific Coast." "Art Pottery" and "The Arts and Crafts Book" are treated separately. Ample captions for the illustrations of furniture, glass, pottery, wallpaper, textiles, metalwork, and books, an extensive bibliography of over 200 sources, a chronology of significant events, and a list of major figures make this catalogue an excellent starting point for researchers.

What Robert Judson Clark did for the American Arts and Crafts Movement in general, Kirsten Hoving Keen has done for American Art Pottery. Her *American Art Pottery, 1875–1930,* traces the movement from its origins in women's china-painting clubs and classes through an analysis of the work of individual designers, studio artists, art potteries, and small manufacturies. She discusses the wide diversity of styles, techniques, and design content of the products—the finely painted Rookwood, the matt-glazed and modeled Grueby, the experimental Robertson glazes, and the sinuous Art Nouveau pieces of Van Briggle—design ideas unified only by the fact that the pieces were produced "as art . . . no two alike." Keen cites the movement's economic, historical, philosophical, and aesthetic foundations, and the influence of the international expositions and of Japanese art. Here again ample captions and notes enliven the text. The bibliography lists 134 sources.

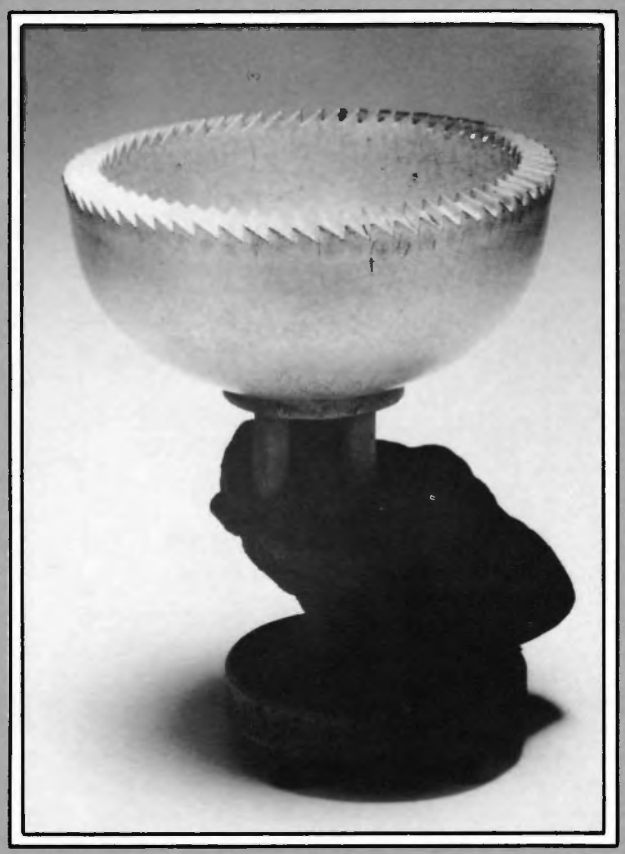
Garth Clark's foray into the history of American ceramics is as co-curator of the exhibition and co-author of the catalogue, with Margie Hughto, *A Century of Ceramics in the United States, 1878–1978,* which was organized by the Everson Museum of Art in 1979. About one-third of the catalogue is devoted to Art Pottery, covering much the same ground as the earlier Keen publication. Biographies and a bibliography of over 500 items add to its usefulness as a general survey.

Women provided the impetus for the American Art Pottery Movement, which grew out of their passion for china painting in the 1870s. Indeed, as Carol Macht asserts in her essay for the catalogue, *The Ladies, God Bless 'Em,* "without them there would probably have been no Art Pottery Movement or Women's Art Movement in America," both of which began in Cincinnati. Macht traces the history of the Women's Art Movement in Cincinnati in the nineteenth century: their determined efforts to establish an art school and clubs, and their support of the Women's Art Museum Association, which was to result in the founding of the Cincinnati Art Museum. No discussion of Art Pottery is complete without reference to Maria Longworth Nichols and her Rookwood Pottery and to the innovations and experiments of Laura Fry and Mary Louise McLaughlin. Their activities, politicking, and internecine feuding make for a lively historical aside. An extensive chronology, selected biographies, and a bibliography of about seventy items add weight to this well-illustrated catalogue. Drawing on museum archives, old journals, and records, the curators have prepared comprehensive notes for the pieces illustrated.

Overglaze Imagery: Cone 019–016 focuses on the use of painted imagery fired at low temperatures. Because of its theme, the contributors to this catalogue were compelled to consider the contributions of the Women's Art Movement. Garth Clark's essay describes "Painted Porcelain in the Orient and Europe from the 13th to the Early 20th Century." It is, however, the excerpts from *The Ladies, God Bless 'Em* and Judy Chicago's essay, "World of the China Painter, Late 19th Century to 20th Century," that brings the exhibition into perspective as a discussion of women's art. Richard Shaw's essay, "Beyond the Barriers of Tradition: Late 20th Century," while attributing the resurgence of interest in ceramic painting to the work of Ken Price, Ron Nagle (whose mother had been a china painter), Michael Frimkess, and Jim Melchert, nevertheless illustrates his text with the work of Patti Warashina, Joyce Moty, Jacquelyn Rice, Viola Frey, and other women ceramists. Glossaries and biographies augment the text.

Joanne Polster is head librarian of the American Craft Council. With the aid of a Services to the Field grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, she is compiling a retrospective index of selected craft periodicals.

The next issue will continue this review of exhibition catalogues concerning the American Arts and Crafts Movement.



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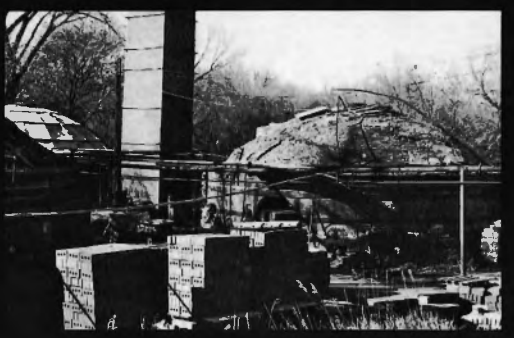

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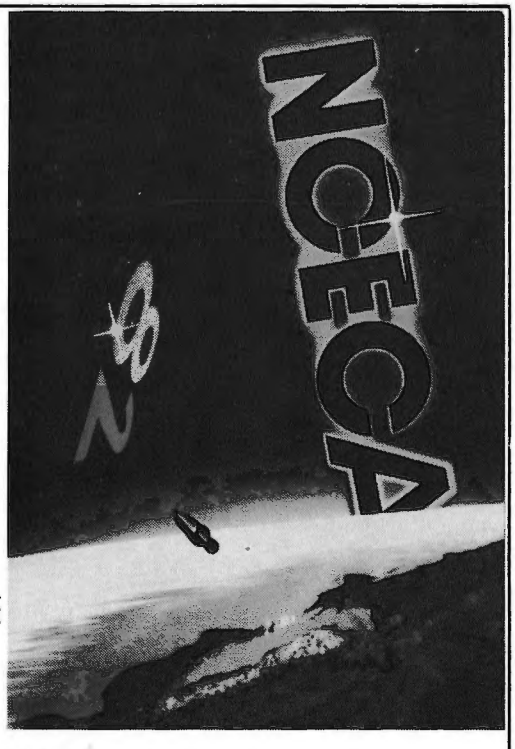

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